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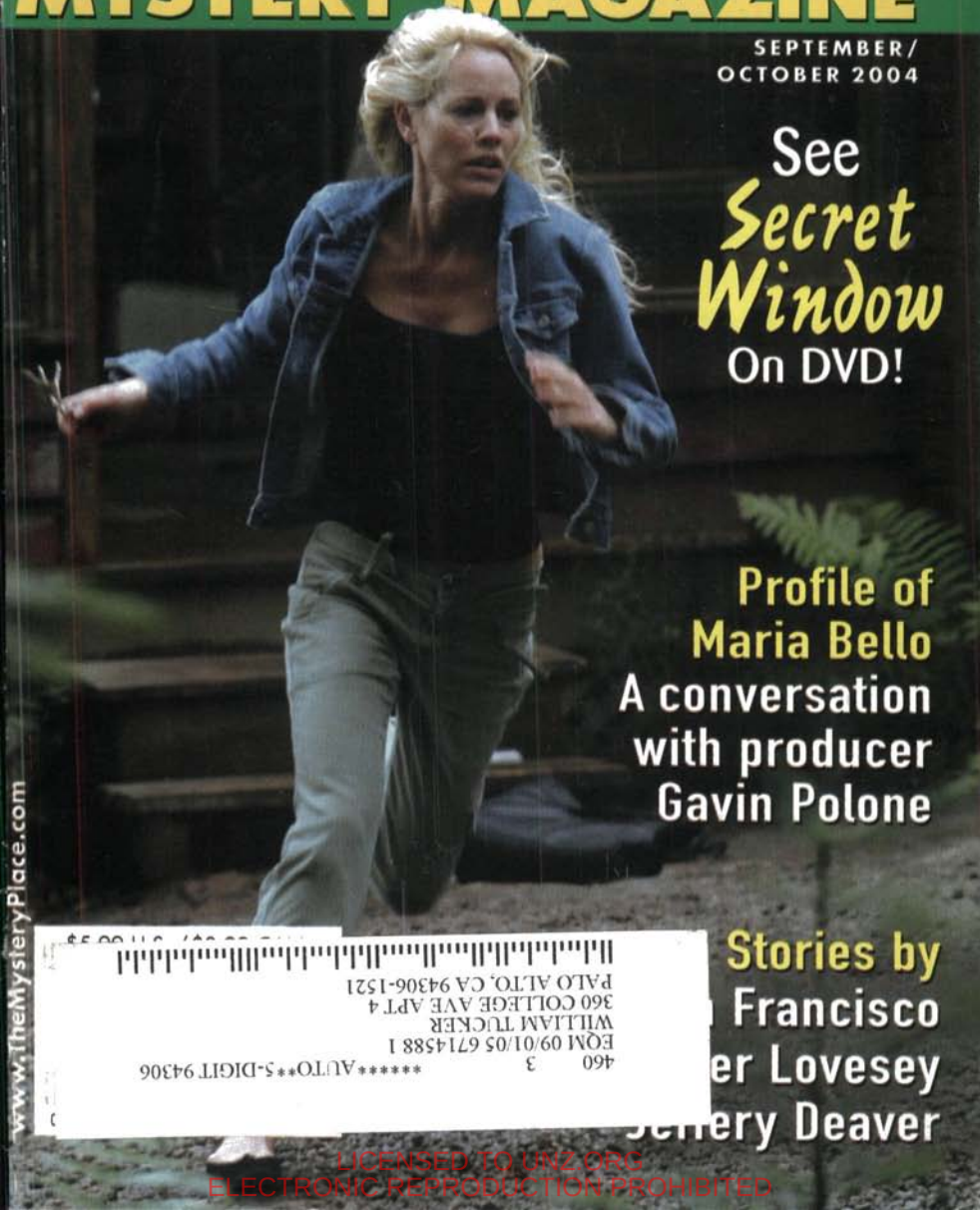

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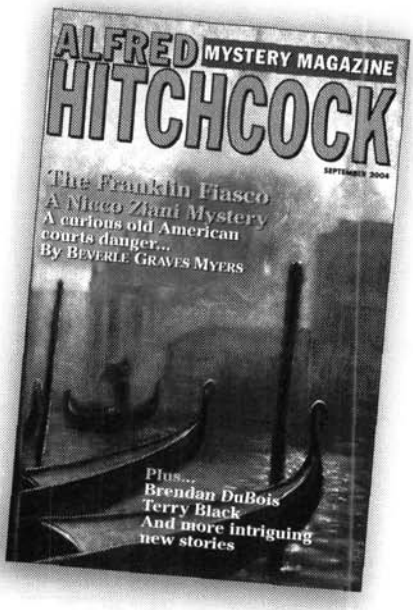

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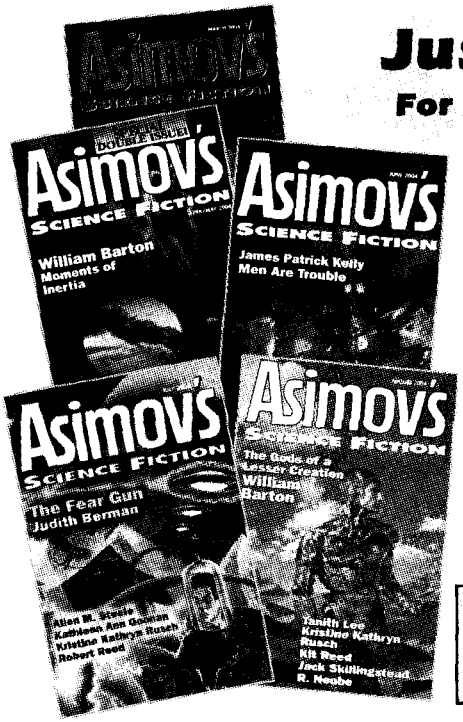

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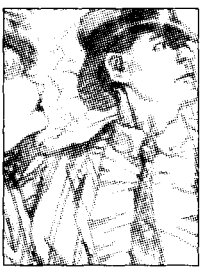

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Art by Laurie Harden

Dream of Murder

by Ruth Francisco

I found the first arm. The second one washed up on Malibu beach seven miles north of here. The rest of the body must've gotten eaten by sharks.

The newspapers gave credit to a jogger who came by later and that's okay by me. I'm legal and everything. I was born here. But that doesn't mean I want to talk to cops.

Two or three times a week, I get up at four-thirty and take my beat-up Toyota truck down Washington Boulevard to the beach. I go to fish. They say the fish are too polluted to eat, but it tastes better than what you can buy at the store and it's free. In the two hours before work, I catch enough bonito or barracuda to feed my family and my neighbors for a few days. When I snag a halibut, I give some to Consuello Rosa, my landlady, and she lets the rent slide awhile.

Usually I fish off the jetty in Marina del Rey at the end of the channel because it's quiet and beautiful. That's the real reason I fish. My younger kids prefer to eat hot dogs, and the fourteen-year-old won't eat nothing her mother cooks, period. So I fish for myself.

On the morning I found the arm, it was still dark when I got to

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the beach. The moon was setting over the ocean, cutting a white path to the horizon. I threaded leftover chorizo on my fishing lines for bait. I like to think that it's like home-cooking for the fish who got spawned down in Baja. I don't want them to forget where they come from. I threw in three lines, then unscrewed my thermos and poured myself some coffee. I was leaning on my elbows, not thinking about much, watching the black night fade to gray and the low mist pulling back from the shore like a puddle drying up on hot asphalt.

Then I saw the arm.

Ruth Francisco worked in the film industry for fifteen years before the publication of her first novel, *Confessions of a Deathmaiden,* in 2003. An expanded version of "Dream of Murder" forms the first chapter of her new novel, *Good Morning, Darkness,* which is due from Mysterious Press this September. The following is the author's first published short fiction—a superb debut that *EQMM* is proud to bring its readers! ✝

It lay on the sand about twenty feet from the water where the beach is hard and smooth. The tide must've brought it in and left it.

At first I thought it was a piece of rain gutter like I bought from Home Depot the other day for a job. I climbed down from the jetty to take a closer look. I didn't have to get close to know it wasn't plastic. It was a left arm. It didn't smell like the seals I've found on the beach or the whale from a few years back. That you could smell for a mile. But then the morning was still cool. I could tell it was a woman's arm, white with fine hair. The fingers had chipped pearl and clear nail polish, which, 'cause I have a fourteen-year-old daughter, I knew was called a French manicure. There was a pretty ring on her third finger.

I probably would've taken the ring if her fingers hadn't been so swollen. I looked to make sure no one else was around, then squatted by the arm. I touched the skin; it didn't bounce back. It felt like a mushroom—fragile and a little slippery. I wasn't repulsed, but maybe a little sad, like when you stop to move roadkill to the side of the highway and realize it's an animal you don't see much anymore, like a silver fox or a bobcat.

As I stood up, the waves pushed a white rose onto the beach. Most of its petals were gone, and it had a long stem like the expensive kind people buy to throw off their sailboats along with someone's ashes.

The sun was beginning to come up; and it was going to be one of those hot spring mornings that acts like summer is in a hurry. I

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knew someone else would come by, so I went back to my fishing poles and kept an eye on it. In a half-hour a jogger found it, a white man in his forties running on the beach. He was working at it like his lower back hurt, and I bet he was glad when he saw the arm and had an excuse to stop. He touched it with the toe of his sneaker like he thought it might still be alive. That made me laugh. He reached into his pocket and whipped out a cell phone.

From then on, it was his arm.

A lady with a couple of dogs walked toward him and he yelled at her to put them on a leash. She looked pissed until she saw what he was fussing about. By the time the cops showed up there was a ring of people and dogs around the arm. Plainclothes detectives and the coroner showed up twenty minutes later. They spent an hour poking at it, taking its temperature, snapping photos. I even saw one of the detectives bend down and sniff it. Finally, they put the arm in a blue plastic bag and drove off with it.

It wasn't until that evening, after I told the kids and the wife about it, and the neighbors on both sides, and my cousin Paco who dropped by just in time for dinner, after the house finally got quiet and I was drinking a glass of tequila behind the garage on the brick patio I'll finish one of these days, that I thought about the woman the arm belonged to, of what she must've looked like.

That was when I realized I knew who she was.

Laura Finnegan woke with a start, her heart pounding, her white tank top sweaty, clinging to her breasts, the sheets twisted around her ankles. She let her head fall back onto the pillow, exhaling with a bleating sound. She could feel the blood throbbing in her neck, and she imagined her heart and its network of veins and arteries as an octopus caught in a trap, convulsing, thrashing its arms. A dull headache began above her eyebrows. She wiped the pools of sweat from under her arms with the bottom of her shirt.

What a horrible dream.

As soon as she was awake enough to command her muscles, she propped herself up on her elbows and turned her head.

Scott lay sleeping beside her, soundless, oblivious. He never seemed to wake up gradually to morning sounds—birds, traffic, garbage trucks—but slept deeply until the alarm went off, like a child dead to the world. The top sheet, white with blue cornflowers, curtained over his shoulder and tucked under his chin. She found it odd that it had never before occurred to her that sheets with flower prints were meant to give you the impression of sleeping in a field of blossoms. She squinted, blurring her focus, and imaged a boy napping on the hindquarter of his dog in a meadow of wildflowers. He looked so sweet, so harmless.

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She shuddered, remembering him in her dream. Her terror lingered, leaving her drained, her stomach raw and nauseated.

Slowly she pulled the sheet off his body, admiring his shoulders, his chest, his muscular thighs and calves.

He slept on his right side, facing her, his right arm draped over the pillow, his left thigh at a forty-five-degree angle as if he were climbing. He had a long face with a squared-off chin, tanned skin, and a mop of straight blond hair. She noticed faint wrinkles on his neck and at the corners of his eyes, which were set a little too close. He was a perfect L.A. boy-man.

As if pricked, she jerked her hand back to touch her neck. Never had she been so frightened by a dream. Never had a dream felt so real. She seldom remembered her dreams, but this dream she could still smell—the stench of red tide at dawn, decaying fish, rancid seaweed. Even with her eyes open, faint images, black, white, and red, flashed like danger signs over her irises. She could see the coldness in his eyes and an odd twist in his mouth, like when he was close to coming.

Yet here he was, nuzzling the pillow, sweet as a toddler.

Scott was a generous man, an enthusiastic although not a particularly adventurous lover. He claimed to adore her. He was handsome, athletic, attentive, and funny. He acted as if she were the first and only girl he'd ever loved. Her girlfriends told her that when he asked—for there was no doubt in anyone's mind that he would ask—she should agree to marry him. When they said this, they looked invariably wistful, yet happy for her at the same time, as if she'd won the lottery, as if having a guy like this be nuts about you happened only to the lucky few.

But in her dream he stood glaring at her with red in his eyes and black in his heart, an image far more vivid than the man who lay beside her.

Was her subconscious telling her that Scott was dangerous? Warning her? She tried to think of anything about Scott that ever frightened her. He was a little jealous, she admitted. He acted proud when other men looked at her, but bristled if they looked too long. She avoided talking about her male colleagues, hating the way his face froze, his eyes stabbing hard into hers until she explained that Ralph, Harry, or Tom was gay or sixty.

But most men were like that, weren't they? A little insecure? Scott couldn't hide his emotions. He complained obsessively about imagined slights, his face turning beet red, his voice rising, usually out of proportion to the transgression. But he'd never directed his anger at her. He'd never raised a hand to her, never yelled at her. Never.

Nothing she could think of explained her dream. With her arms and legs still fluttering with adrenaline and a fuzzy skunklike taste

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souring her mouth, she realized it didn't feel like a dream at all.

It felt like a premonition.

Scott Goodsell was in love. He was sure of it. He felt like dancing, in the middle of the day, in the middle of the bank parking lot like some crazy homeless person on Venice Beach. He was in love with the most beautiful woman in the world. She was a goddess.

Scott thought of himself as a sensitive man, a post-women's-liberation man who respected women and treated them as equals yet appreciated their oddities. He'd grown up with three sisters and had listened when they wept about their boyfriends. On occasion, he'd even flipped through women's magazines, astonished at their tales of sexual abuse, even more astonished at all the products women could buy to make themselves more appealing to men, stuff men don't even like—perfume, makeup, shit like that. He couldn't understand guys who shouted obscenities at a beautiful woman walking by. Did they really think women found that sexy? Or did it give them pleasure to torment women they could never possibly have?

Scott felt he'd tried to be honest in his relationships—at least during the last few years—and when he broke up with a woman, he always did it in person, gently, always reassuring her that she was incredibly desirable, but that it was all him, a problem with commitment he was working on. He almost always was able to remain on good terms with them, usually to the extent that they'd welcome a call if he got stuck alone on a Saturday night without a date.

Yet, even though he'd had his share of women, and despite what he considered to be his special understanding of them, he'd never before been in love.

Laura changed all that. Her beauty took his breath away. She was thin and delicate, with long fingers, a long neck, and long thighs. Her dark-brown hair fell perfectly straight down to the middle of her back, and when he turned her to him, pushing back her hair to reveal her piercing blue eyes, he lost himself.

She was a Modigliani come to life. She possessed a sad, mysterious quality, her body relaxed but alert, her head angled slightly to one side as if she were trying to catch the words to a distant song. And if he stood quietly beside her, sometimes it seemed that he too could hear the music.

He loved her efficiency and that she never complained. To his relief, she never talked about her job. All the other women he'd dated yapped on about their careers, office politics, job deadlines, chauvinism, both real and imagined, from superiors. Not exactly what a guy wants to hear after a long day. Nor did she jabber about her periods or her mother or her ex-boyfriends. In fact, she didn't talk much at all.

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Laura talked with her body. To Scott, her movements were enchanting. Even something as simple as picking up a book or walking across the room seemed choreographed—graceful, fluid, pregnant with meaning. Starting with her lips, her smile spread down her shoulders, up her lifted arms, then to the tips of her fingers. It was like watching a flower unfold in time-lapse photography.

He liked to play a game. He'd watch Laura while she did something simple like peel an orange, then try to guess what she was thinking. Then he'd ask her. He loved her all the more when he guessed right. And when they made love, he found he forgot about himself, completely enchanted by the undulations of her body.

This must be why he loved her. No matter how anxious he was about his work or family, when he saw her he forgot everything, seduced like a pyromaniac gazing into a fire.

So this is it, he thought, as he sat in his white BMW convertible queued up to make a left turn on a backed-up Westwood Boulevard. What was he waiting for?

He stepped on the gas and swerved into the right lane, accelerating through a yellow light. Two blocks down, he pulled up to the red zone in front of a flower shop. He dashed in and bought a dozen long-stemmed red roses. Before the florist finished wrapping them in silver paper, he impulsively asked her to add one white rose. He didn't know why, it just seemed right.

He jumped back into his car and raced toward the beach. He swerved into a parking lot next to a liquor store.

It was the grungy kind of store that made most of its money from overpriced junk food, beer, and lottery tickets, but in a refrigerator hidden in the back, he found a dozen excellent champagnes to choose from. Overpriced, of course, but what did he care? This was a once-in-a-lifetime event. He selected a bottle of Dom Pérignon.

He stood in line behind a construction worker who wanted cigarettes and a woman wearing too many clothes who smelled like urine, but he barely noticed them. He rocked back and forth on the balls of his feet, eyes darting around the store. What else did he need? Dinner. He needed to make reservations, then call her for a date. Where? It had to be just right. Ambiance was more important than food. He got it. Geoffrey's in Malibu, right on the water, small and intimate. On his cell phone, he dialed directory assistance, got connected, and made reservations for seven o'clock. Laura liked to eat early. God, this was fun.

Then he rang up Laura at work. She answered with that sleepy voice of hers. "Good afternoon. This is Laura."

"How 'bout dinner?" He tried to sound sexy.

She hesitated a little before answering, but he didn't make any-

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thing of it. She was probably preparing for a client. Then she said, "I would like that."

"I'll pick you up around six-thirty." He couldn't wait to see her.

The clerk, impatient for his money, glared at Scott with an expression that said he hated cell phones and hated the people who used them even more. Scott slipped the phone into his pocket, then paid for the champagne in cash. He was jazzed.

He had twenty minutes before he had to show a house in Brentwood. He dashed home to put the roses in water, cutting the ends at an angle like he'd seen his eldest sister Martha do.

He stopped. His heart was pounding. He hadn't felt this stoked since he'd surfed the Banzai Pipeline in Oahu. That was awesome, but how many years ago was that—two? three?—way too long between mega-rushes. What had he been doing with his life?

His eyes drifted slowly around his apartment, a beige affair with Berber carpets and motel furniture left over from a fraternity brother who'd moved out. His surfboard lay against one wall. He'd never gotten around to putting up pictures, not wanting to put up posters like a teenager, but also not wanting to take the time to figure out what else to hang.

He'd have to give all this up. He laughed at himself. Grow up, Scott! But was he doing the right thing? Was she the right girl?

Yes. The answer was clearer to him than anything in his entire life. Yes, he would ask her to marry him.

When Scott called Laura on the phone, she heard the excitement in his voice. She figured he'd gotten a job promotion, or a new motorcycle, or some other toy, or maybe one of the vacation bonuses that his job doled out to motivate their salespeople. She didn't ask. She wasn't even curious. She knew he liked to tell her such things in person, drawing out the telling like a ringmaster holding the spotlight as the house lights go down.

She liked Scott. She liked his boyish energy. She liked being treated so well. Perhaps she even loved him.

She put on a short black dress with spaghetti straps that clearly revealed her breasts underneath. It felt like wearing nothing at all. When she told him, she wanted to be completely vulnerable. She wanted to feel his hurt, and she wanted to appear her most beautiful when she hurt him.

It was a small revenge for what he did to her in her dream.

As he entered the restaurant, Scott overtipped the valet, the doorman, and the maître d'. He wanted everything to be perfect. He got a table on the terrace and ordered a fancy wine.

She looked so beautiful in that black dress that looked like a slip, her hair loosely piled on top of her head, her eyes blue as

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tropical water, her mouth red, her bony shoulders vulnerable and seductive, her only jewelry a single black pearl he'd brought back for her from Tahiti, its pear shape falling in the crevice between her breasts.

He wanted to give her the ring now so he could watch it on her long fingers as she lifted her wine goblet and ate dinner, but he knew you were supposed to wait until after the meal, down on one knee, before the waiter brings coffee and dessert, before you order champagne to celebrate.

They ate in silence. She ordered Chilean sea bass in mango sauce, he the rack of lamb.

As the waiter took away their plates, Scott felt his heart beating rapidly and sweat gathering inside his shirt collar. He didn't quite know where to start. He'd prepared a short speech in his mind, something about coming of age, taking his place in the community, sharing his life with the perfect woman, but now it seemed so cliché. He wanted words that were more real, that told her how wonderful she made him feel.

Then she said, "Scott, I have something to tell you. Perhaps it isn't the right time, but I don't suppose it ever will feel like the right time."

"Go on," he said. After his initial surprise, it occurred to him that maybe Laura was pregnant. A bit of a shock, but what could be better? They'd start a family right away. That sure would make his mother happy. Or maybe she was going to propose to him. He loved how she continued to surprise him, her secrets, her little revelations. He waited as she paused, searching as she always did for the right words.

"You know how much I think of you—"

"No, tell me," Scott said, his smile crooked, a smile he'd perfected in front of the mirror as a teenager to pick up girls, a smile that had become part of him, which he now used to sell houses. "You know I can never hear enough about me." He got her to smile back and it flooded his body with warmth.

"You're wonderful," she said. "You're generous and kind and handsome—"

"And a sexual athlete."

"That too. You're the greatest guy I've ever met."

"Gee, thanks," he said, not used to blushing, his body tingling all over. He felt a flash of heat in his groin and felt like leaping over the table and taking her right there.

"But I don't think we should see each other anymore."

It was like someone slammed a two-by-four in his face, his ears suddenly pounding, his dinner burning in his chest, threatening to erupt. He was speechless.

"It's not that I don't care for you. I do. But I don't feel comfort-

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able anymore. I think we should stop before things get out of hand."

"Out of hand?" he nearly shouted. "How can things get out of hand? I want to marry you."

It was her turn to be surprised, but she shook her head and said, "No, it's too late for that."

"Too late? What are you talking about? You've been screwing someone else?" Several diners looked over at their table with raised eyebrows.

"No, nothing like that. Calm down, Scott. There's no one else."

"Then what? I don't understand. Tell me." A shiver went through his body; he felt he might suddenly lose control, as if he were driving on ice.

"I had a dream."

Scott paused, then laughed too loudly. Everything would be all right after all. "So . . . you had a dream?"

"Not just a dream. It was horrible. Last time you slept over."

He felt a nastiness creep over him, something like jealousy but different. He pushed it aside. She was obviously upset. He should listen. "What was your dream about?"

"I dreamed you killed me."

Scott paused a second—thinking—then laughed, warmly, confidently. How he loved her, her face so serious, her neck taut and vulnerable. He wanted to reach over and kiss that spot that drove her crazy, where her neck joined her shoulders. "It's a metaphor, don't you see? It's so obvious. You're afraid if we marry, you'll lose part of yourself . . . that something of yourself will be killed off." He took her hand. "That won't happen. I promise you."

Laura slowly slipped her hand away. "In my dream, you became obsessed with me, stalked me, then brutally murdered me."

The word "murder" stung him, took his breath. "I can't believe it," he sputtered. "You're more afraid of commitment than I am and I'm the playboy of L.A. I'm the guy Hefner publishes for."

The corners of her mouth turned down in a slight frown. "When I look at you, even now, I see your face just as you were about to kill me, your eyes filled with loathing. I don't want you ever to hate me that much. I couldn't bear it."

He saw her lips trembling, her forearms folded across her chest, her hands cupping her shoulders. Her fear stabbed deep into his heart. "Laura, darling. I love you. I could never hate you. It was just a dream."

"It wasn't just a dream. It felt real."

"Forget about it, sweetheart."

"I can't forget about it. Besides, it doesn't matter if it was just a dream. I'll always wonder when you'll start hating me . . . when you'll hate me enough to murder me."

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Again, that word. He suppressed a small ulcer of anger blooming beneath his ribs. He had to make her believe him. "Laura, I'm here, in the flesh and blood." He paced his words deliberately. "All I can think about is how much I love you. I want to marry you. I want to have children with you. I want to live with you until we're old and ugly and our dentures clack together when we kiss. I was going to ask you tonight. I even have the ring in my pocket."

He reached into his sport coat, pulled out the cracked leather ring box, and opened it. An antique diamond ring, simple and exquisite. He set it in the middle of the table for her to look at, then reached over and gently caressed her left hand.

Her fingers were shaking, cold as ice. He looked deep into her eyes. "Who are you going to believe? A dream or me?"

I'm not a pervert. I don't go sneaking around peeking into people's windows. But if someone leaves their blinds open after dark, or if they get up early in the morning and open their sliding-glass doors to let out the dog, I look. It's impossible not to.

So about eight months ago, I noticed a young woman who got up as early as I do. She lived at the end of the marina peninsula in an older two-story Craftsman that was covered with bougainvillea like a pink cloud. She lived in the rental unit over the garage. Her windows looked out over the channel, and she had a deck with planters of white roses and lavender.

The first morning I noticed her, she was in her kitchen making coffee in a white tank top. She was in her late twenties and very pretty, with long dark hair parted in the middle. She seemed lonely. She had that look I see in women her age. Doesn't matter if they're rich or poor, single or married, they all get it. Like life has disappointed them.

Hers was the only light on at the end of the peninsula, so naturally my eyes were drawn to her. There was something about the way she moved, graceful like she was still sleeping. I set my fishing rod down on the toe of my boot and stood mesmerized. While she waited for the water to boil, she fed a mourning dove that perched on the bougainvillea outside her window. The bird took it right out of her hand. She left the kitchen, then came back with a hairbrush. She stood there and brushed her hair looking out at the ocean. If she'd looked in my direction, she would've seen me, but she didn't. She looked off toward Catalina as if she were waiting for the mist to clear so she could see her homeland.

From then on, when I came down to the jetty I looked for her. Her routine was always the same: coffee, bird, hair. On warm mornings she'd pull back her hair and pile it on top of her head, arching her long neck, stretching her arms and her shoulders. She smiled and closed her eyes as if she were imagining someone kiss-

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ing her neck. Not that *I* thought about kissing her neck. I just enjoyed watching her—like watching the egrets in Grand Canal wading in the mud at low tide.

I got caught once. The guy who owns the place is a famous sculptor from Belgium or someplace. I don't know what he was doing up so early that morning. Maybe he woke from a dream all inspired and wanted to start work. He uses the sandy lot beside his house as his studio, which is always covered with logs and half-finished pieces of wood bolted on top of one another. On one side of the lot is a tool shed, but sometimes he leaves them out.

As usual, I was standing by the Japanese boxwood hedge watching the girl, the pink dawn reflecting in the kitchen windows. It made her face look like it was floating in the clouds. Like a goddess brushing her hair, smiling down on a poor Mexican fisherman.

Then the sculptor saw me. He was barefoot and wore cutoff gray sweatpants, his naked chest matted with gray and white hair, and his shaggy eyebrows pinched together so I couldn't see his eyes. He saw that I was watching her. He picked up an axe that was resting by the shed, gripped the handle with both hands, raised it high over his head, and slammed it down into a log. His body quivered. He looked up and glared at me.

I backed up and ran.

Later, I wanted to go back to explain myself, to tell him I wasn't a Peeping Tom, that I didn't touch myself while I watched the girl, or even later when I thought about her. I wanted to tell him it wasn't like that, that she was like the morning to me, sacred and beautiful. He might understand. He was an artist. But then, he might not, and he was a scary bastard.

Then, a few weeks later, I found the arm.

Her boss, Mr. Johnson, called Laura into his office. Was there a problem? Something he could help her with? he asked, his doughy face squeezed into a lecherous smirk. Her personal telephone calls were distracting the other employees. The receptionist was upset, threatening to quit. The poor girl even had to call security once last week when Laura's friend showed up demanding to see her. As floor supervisor, Mr. Johnson didn't want to lose Laura, but her work was suffering. Did she want to take some time off? Or perhaps she should talk to someone in human resources who could refer her to an agency? There were laws in California now, stalker laws. She could get legal protection.

Laura thanked her boss for his concern, but she assured him she could handle it. She got the feeling he enjoyed watching her squirm. He obviously got a prurient thrill out of asking personal questions. He gave her the creeps.

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As she walked back to her desk, she avoided the curious glances of her fellow workers who now fell silent when she joined them in the lunchroom, as if she were suspected of stealing office supplies, or worse.

How long could it go on? Surely Scott would give up sooner or later. Find another girl. Go away on a vacation and forget about her.

It had started with nonstop phone calls, followed by flowers and presents. When she didn't return his messages and refused his gifts, he showed up at her house or at work, each time a little more desperate. She didn't think Scott would hurt her, but there was something wild in his eyes. A craziness. When he grabbed her wrist in the parking lot at Powerhouse Gym, she felt afraid.

"Is it because I didn't ask you to marry me earlier? That's it, isn't it? But I was going to, don't you see? The very day you dumped me."

"We've been over this, Scott. It's not that at all."

"I know I get selfish in bed sometimes. Is that it? I'll slow down, but you gotta tell me what you like."

"Scott, you're a good lover. That has nothing to do with it."

"I know I'm kind of a slob, but when we get married, we'll get a maid. You won't have to pick up after me."

"We're not getting married, Scott."

"Why not? What did I do? I thought we were such a perfect couple. Everyone said so. Hell, my mother even likes you and she's hated all my girlfriends."

"Scott, I can't take much more of this. It has nothing to do with you or your mother or your friends. It's over. That's all."

"Is it because I never said 'I love you'? I do, more than anything. I'll say it over and over again, ten times a day. I love you I love you I love you."

"I love you, too, Scott."

"But not that way," his tone turning sarcastic, nasty. "You fell out of love with me. Is that it?"

"Stop badgering me. It's over, that's all."

"Because of a dream?"

"I know you don't understand, but I can't be with you."

"It isn't fair. I can compete with another man, I can change my habits, I can read sex manuals, but I can't compete with a dream. I know you've got that *Rules* book that tells you to play hard to get, but this is ridiculous."

"I'm not playing hard to get, Scott."

"But why?"

Sometimes she wondered if she had been unfair to Scott, parsimonious in her explanation. But how could she explain something she didn't fully understand herself? She had no words to describe

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the painful terror of her revelation, a darkness as piercing as the sun, a reverberating emptiness that left her aimless and depressed. It was better, she decided, to be ruthless, to cut him off cleanly, irrevocably, to catapult him from her orbit like an unwanted satellite. She felt she needed to do this to save herself.

Laura read in a pamphlet that one of her friends gave her that she should alter her routine so she would be less predictable, less vulnerable. So she drove a different way to work, shopped at a different supermarket, used different ATMs, came home at different hours. She signed up for a class in self-defense. She disliked it at first, the punching and thrusting. It seemed so mean. During the first class she cried and felt horribly embarrassed until the instructor said it happened to lots of women. They weren't used to striking out, he explained. She skipped the second session. It took her two weeks to gather the courage to go back.

Scott was sure she was seeing someone else. After all, that was the most reasonable explanation for why she broke up with him, wasn't it? But why didn't she simply tell him? He couldn't imagine her liking anyone more than him, but he thought he'd be able to accept a rival. At least there'd be someone to hate.

So he followed her.

He couldn't figure out why she was driving all the way into Venice to go shopping, or to Culver City to use the bank, or to the Powerhouse Gym that was almost in Westwood. Was that where she met her new boyfriend?

On Wednesday nights she drove to a studio on Washington Boulevard and got out of her car with a sketchbook. Since when was she into art? She was a dancer. Dancers don't have talent, not creative talent like that. He became convinced that was where she met her lover.

He watched closely as she came out of the studio, but she didn't talk to anyone. None of the guys who came out looked her type. In fact, the class was almost all middle-aged women, a couple of real old guys who probably got off on seeing naked models, and some punk kids he figured were digital animators. It had to be the teacher, then.

So he waited.

The teacher came out of the studio fifteen minutes after the last student. As soon as he leaned over to lock the door, Scott knew it was him, the mystery lover. So she was doing an artist. Not even an artist, an art teacher, which meant he didn't have enough talent to make it as an artist. He was tall and thin with long blond hair. He wore black jeans, a black leather jacket, and cowboy boots. When he got on a motorcycle, Scott snorted in disgust. Figures she'd fall for someone like that.

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A nasty, itchy rage ripped across his chest like a brush fire. He followed the bike up Fairfax—he couldn't help himself—then to Crescent Heights, across Sunset up into the Hollywood Hills. He had to follow more closely than he wanted because the narrow road twisted as it climbed, but the artist didn't seem to notice him. The bike turned into the driveway of a Frank Lloyd Wright knock-off on the top of the hill.

So she wanted a house. That must be the attraction. He cursed himself. Of course that's why she dumped him. Every woman wants a house. He was a Realtor, for chrissake. He could've gotten her a house without even trying.

The artist parked his bike underneath an overhang by the garage. Scott pulled up to the curb, leaving the engine running, then unfastened his seat belt. He watched and waited. As the artist pulled off his helmet, Scott leapt out of the car, charged across the driveway, and slugged him on the side of the head. The artist fell backward into some ferns, his eyes wide with terror, covering his head with his arms as Scott kicked his thighs, chest, and stomach. "You leave my girlfriend alone. She's mine, faggot."

The front door swung open. A middle-aged man, muscular, clean-shaven, with close-cropped hair, stepped out. "Hey, what's going on here?" he asked, his voice high-pitched and tense. "Tommy, are you all right?"

In an instant, Scott realized his mistake. He staggered back, aghast at the blood on his hand, the crumpled figure on the ground, the sweat dripping in rivulets under his jacket, the acrid smell of fear seeping from his body.

He turned and ran back to his car.

"There are laws against gay-bashing, you damn Nazi!" the artist's lover yelled as Scott's car screeched down the hill.

Something was changing in her and she liked it. By altering her routines, she realized how stuck she'd become. She'd forgotten how to see, how to be alive to her surroundings. Now she was developing a new life, trying new activities, finding new friends. She had more energy. Life seemed filled with opportunities. She dashed across parking lots, afraid yet exhilarated, and it must've shown in her face because people noticed her, regarding her with interest as if this chance meeting might suddenly catapult their lives into a new direction.

She enjoyed her drawing class so much she signed up for creative writing. She threw herself into it as if making up for lost time. There was a whole world out there of things to do and learn. Just waiting for her.

Yet despite this new feeling of empowerment, she sensed sometimes that she was being watched, a tingling, chilling feeling as if

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a light fog surrounded her. It was scary and exciting at the same time. She thought maybe Scott was following her, but she never saw him. Maybe it was only his memory, a threat lingering in the imagination, like fear of the ocean after seeing a movie filled with terrifying shark attacks.

Maybe she missed him.

Many times after work, Scott drove by her house to see if her light was on. If she wasn't home yet, he parked in the alley and waited.

As he sat drinking a beer, watching, he remembered that when they first started spending the night together, she wouldn't sleep in the same bed with him; after sex, she would pull a quilt out of the closet and go to sleep on the couch in the living room. She said she couldn't fall asleep in the same bed with anybody, but after a few months, she began dozing off beside him, and he remembered how warm and happy that made him feel.

All it took was time and patience, he told himself. He fingered the ring box in the pocket of his jacket, the old leather soft as suede where it had cracked and worn away. He'd carried the box with him ever since the day at Geoffrey's because he knew, when the time was right, she would agree to wear it.

This was a Friday night; he knew she didn't have a class. The front house was dark and he figured the sculptor must be out. It got to be ten-thirty and she still hadn't shown up. She must be on a date, he guessed, and the more he thought about it, the angrier he got. She'd be sorry if she brought anyone home. Those bruises he gave that faggot art teacher were just a warmup.

As it got to be around half-past eleven, he became worried. He finished his third beer, his last, and wished he had another even though it didn't taste good to him anymore. Maybe she was already there in the house, injured. Maybe she'd fainted and hit her head, or maybe she'd taken too many sleeping pills and suffocated in her pillow. He suddenly felt incredibly anxious, as if crabs were trying to scratch their way out of his stomach.

Dammit! He was going in.

Just as he was about to flip open the car door, he saw her headlights turn up the alley.

She closed the front door to her apartment, but instead of turning on the lights, she opened the blinds to let in the moonlight. She wanted to savor the magic of the evening, that slightly tipsy feeling after a first date, aroused, knowing he'd been interested, but not yet hot with lust; she was intoxicated with the possibility of desire. It was her first date since she'd broken up with Scott, a blind date set up by a friend from work. At first glance she thought she could never be interested in him, but by the end of the

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evening, after an extended hug which neither of them seemed to be able to break, she was surprised by a powerful attraction.

She pulled off her clothes, leaving them in a pile on the living room floor, then slid open the glass door to the balcony. The cool ocean breeze played over her naked breasts, neck, and shoulders. It felt both soothing and exciting. Soon she was cold; she walked into the bedroom to get a white T-shirt from under her pillow.

She went back into the kitchen. She poured herself a glass of iced tea from the refrigerator and stood looking out the windows, watching the moon glisten on the channel water. She loved the stillness, the ripples, the slow creep of moonlight; it completed her like her mate, as if it were all she needed, this solitude.

Finally fatigue melted over her. She dragged herself to the bedroom, climbed into bed, and pulled the down quilt up to her neck. As soon as her body was still and she could feel her heart beating, she longed for the ocean breeze. She got out of bed, threw open all the bedroom windows, then crawled back under the covers. The cold air chilled her face and she kicked her feet until they warmed up.

For a long time Laura lay awake reliving her date. At first, she thought he was rather boring, but she let him talk and discovered he had other interests, in geology and scuba diving, and after their hug, she let him kiss her, and the kiss felt good, like she hadn't been kissed in a very long time, new and a little scary, and she realized this person didn't know anything about her, and she didn't want him to know anything about her, thinking too that usually the better looking a man was the worse he kissed and made love, and the man she was kissing was nice and a little goofy-looking, and his arms and shoulders were wonderfully strong.

She cleared her mind of his image and listened to the silence of the marina, a car passing, the plaintive hoot of a mourning dove. She suddenly felt fortunate to be awake while her neighbors slept, as if their sleeping gave her more room to breathe, more room for her thoughts, for her being.

Then she heard a thud against the side of the house, footsteps on her balcony, and the glass doors in the living room sliding open. She sat up quickly, her skin all gooseflesh, a cold stab of regret shooting up her spine, for she knew immediately that *HE* had climbed up to the second floor and was there in the dark.

"Laura? It's me." His voice was light and querulous like an adolescent boy, the hard leather soles of his shoes scraping across the living room floor, his palms slapping the furniture, then posturing in the doorway to her bedroom, his hand sliding up the doorjamb, his body still and tense like a dancer waiting for the curtain to rise. "There you are," he said.

She couldn't see his face, but saw the angle of his jaw, like an eel

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ready to strike. "You've been drinking," she said, remembering that drink made him petulant, but not violent. "Go away, Scott."

"Why'd you come home so late? I was worried about you. Wait. Don't tell me if it was a date. I just wanted to make sure you were all right."

Laura used her feet to push herself back until her hips touched the headboard. "I'm calling the police," she said, reaching for the cell phone by her bed, though not dialing.

"You don't need to do that. I just want to talk. Can I turn on the light?" He walked toward her.

"No," she shouted. An urgent instinct to hide in the dark made her pull the cord to the bedside lamp, then scoot to the other side of the bed.

"Jesus, Laura. I'm not going to hurt you. Why are you being like this? Can't we just talk?"

"Don't come near me." She grabbed a wooden hanger from a chair and brandished it like a weapon. "I want you to leave, Scott."

He walked slowly toward her and she swiped back and forth with the hanger until he lunged and grabbed it out of her hand. "Did you think you could hurt me with that?"

She realized she was cornered. She scrambled to the other side of the bed, then began poking the sequence on her cell phone, knowing it was taking too long. Scott rounded the foot of the bed, grabbed her wrists, and slammed her down on the mattress. "For chrissake, Laura. Would you relax? I just want to talk to you."

The entire weight of his body lay on top of her, her arms pinned to the bed, his moist beer-breath on her neck. She went limp. He took the phone from her, then sat back straddling her hips. "I miss you something awful, Laura. You're the only girl for me. Don't you see? Weren't we good together?"

"Get off me," she said firmly, trying hard not to tense her body. "Please, Scott. You're frightening me."

He seemed not to hear, but leaned over and kissed her neck. "Baby, I love you." She struggled, pushing him away, wiggling out from underneath him; he let her go. She jumped out of bed and ran into the living room to her other phone; as she lifted the receiver she dialed madly. The receiver slipped out of her hand. As she bent to get it, Scott came up behind; she darted away carrying the phone with her. The telephone cord pulled tight.

Scott yanked the cord from the wall.

Laura's eyes got round with fear. Scott advanced slowly, circling the room until his back was touching the front door.

"Scott, please leave. We'll talk tomorrow if you want. At a café or something."

"Like a date?" he said bitterly.

"Scott, please."

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"I want to talk now." He inched toward her, then lunged, grabbing her hand. She turned and kicked his head, her heel landing hard on his jaw. He staggered back, shocked, staring at the streak of sticky warm ooze on his fingers. He looked up at Laura, who was crouched in the fighting stance she'd learned.

"Okay, Laura. I'll leave if that's what you want."

"Yes. That's what I want," she said firmly.

He walked to the front door, holding his jaw with one hand. She approached cautiously. As he opened the front door and stepped out, he turned and wedged his body in the doorjamb so she couldn't slam it behind him. "I love you, Laura. I always will."

Her eyes did not soften, filled with disgust. He plunged back through the doorway. But she was ready for him; grabbing the inside doorknob and doorjamb, she launched herself, kicking his chest with both her feet. As he stumbled back, she slammed the door shut and bolted it.

She slumped against the door, her heart pounding wildly, sensing him on the other side. She expected him to pound the door and yell, but he didn't. She ran to the balcony and slid closed the glass panels and locked them, then pulled the blinds. She ran back to the front door and waited. She heard nothing but silence for nearly a minute and she worried that he'd stumbled and hit his head, that he might lie there unconscious until morning, and as she contemplated opening the door to check on him, she heard his footsteps descend the wooden staircase, pause, then crunch across the gravel driveway.

Scott staggered down the steps feeling nauseated, acid burning in his chest. As the cool breeze blew off the water and hit his face, he felt a horror take hold of him, as if life held no more pleasure for him, but was a black bottomless pit crawling with snakes and insects. Dizzy, he caught himself on the post at the bottom of the stairs. He hung there for a moment, his body shaking uncontrollably, his eyes tearing, a deafening rage roaring in his ears so he could hardly see. He squeezed his eyes shut; burning lava shot up his spine, whipping it like a dragon's tail.

He parted his lips in a silent scream, forcing out air until his lungs hurt. He refused to breathe until his chest jerked in spasms and he gulped for oxygen.

Then all was still. A light mist chilled his skin. A fog horn moaned a distant summons as if from another world.

When he opened his eyes, he saw the sculptor's axe driven in a stump, its red handle purple-gray in the moonlight, its sharp, wedge-shaped blade glinting, beckoning, luring him to reach out and set it free. ●

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The Field

by Peter Lovesey

A field of oilseed rape was in flower, brilliant in the afternoon sun, as if a yellow highlighter had been drawn across the landscape. Unseen by anyone, a corpse was stretched out under the swaying crop, attended only by flies and maggots. It had been there ten days. The odour was not detectable from the footpath along the hedgerow.

Fields have names. This one was Middle Field, and it was well named. It was not just the middle field on Jack Mooney's farm. It was the middle of his universe. He had no life outside the farm. His duties kept him employed from first light until after dark.

Middle Field dominated the scene. So Jack Mooney's scarecrow stood out, as much as you could see of it. People said it was a wasted effort. Crows aren't the problem with a rape crop. Pigeons are the big nuisance, and that's soon after sowing. It's an open question whether a scarecrow is any deterrent at all to pigeons. By May or June when the crop is five feet tall it serves no purpose.

"Should have got rid of it months back," Mooney said.

His wife May, at his side, said, "You'd have to answer to the children."

From the highest point at the top of the field you could see more than just the flat cap and turnip head. The shoulders and part of the chest were visible as well. After a long pause Mooney said, "Something's happened to it."

"Now what are you on about?"

"Take a look through the glasses."

She put them to her eyes and adjusted the focus. Middle Field

With a style that *PW* once described as "smooth and polished as steel" and a genius for plotting, Peter Lovesey is one of mystery's most celebrated writers. He is a winner of the British CWA's highest award, the Diamond Dagger, and he's had a good share of recognition on this side of the Atlantic, too—not least his win in the MWA's 50th Anniversary contest in 1995. We believe a page of that winning story, from *EQMM*, may be visible briefly in *Secret Window*. †

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was all of nine acres.

"Funny. Who did that, I wonder?"

Someone had dressed the thing in a raincoat. All it was supposed to be wearing were Mooney's castoff shirt, a pair of corduroy trousers filled with straw, and his old cap.

"How long has it been like that?"

"How would I know?" Mooney said. "I thought you would have noticed."

"I may go on at you for ignoring me, but I'm not so desperate as to spend my days looking at a straw man with a turnip for a head."

"Could have been there for weeks."

"Wouldn't surprise me."

"Some joker?"

"Maybe."

"I'm going to take a closer look."

He waded into his shimmering yellow sea.

Normally he wouldn't set foot in that field until after the combine had been through. But he was curious. Whose coat was it? And why would anyone think of putting it on a scarecrow?

Out in the middle he stopped and scratched his head

It was a smart coat, with epaulettes, sleeve straps, and a belt.

His wife had followed him. She lifted the hem. "It's a Burberry. You can tell by the lining."

"I've never owned one like this."

"You, in a Burberry? You're joking. Been left out a few days by the look of it, but it's not in bad condition."

"Who would have chucked out a fancy coat like this?"

"More important," his wife said, "who would have draped it around our old scarecrow?"

He had made the scarecrow last September on a framework of wood and chicken wire. A stake driven into the earth, with a crosspiece that swivelled when the wind blew, giving the effect of animation. The wire bent into the shape of a torso that hung free. The clothes stuffed with straw. The biggest turnip he could find for a head. He wouldn't have troubled with the features, but his children had insisted he cut slits for eyes and the mouth and a triangle for the nose.

No question: The coat had been carefully fitted on, the arms pulled through, the buttons fixed, and the belt buckled in front.

As if the field itself could explain the mystery, Mooney turned and stared across the canopy of bloom. To the north was his own house and the farm buildings standing out against the skyline. At the lower end, to the southeast, were the tied cottages, three terraced dwellings built from the local stone. They were still called tied cottages by the locals, even though they had been sold off to a developer and knocked into one, now a sizable house being tarted

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up by some townie who came at weekends to check on the work. Mooney had made a good profit from the sale. He didn't care if the locals complained that true village people couldn't afford to live here at prices like that.

Could the coat belong to the townie? he wondered. Was it someone's idea of a joke, dressing the old scarecrow in the townie's smart Burberry? Strange joke. After all, who would know it was there unless they took out some field glasses?

"You know what I reckon?" May said. "Kids."

"Whose kids?"

"Our own. I'll ask them when they get back from school."

The birdsong grew as the afternoon wore on. At the edge of the field closest to the tied cottages more disturbance of the oilseed crop took place. Smaller feet than Mooney's led another expedition. They were his children, the two girls, Sarah and Ally, eleven years old and seven. Behind them came their mother.

"It's not far," Sarah said, looking back.

"Not far, Mum," Ally said.

They were right. No more than ten adult strides in from the path was a place where some of the plants had been flattened.

"See?" Ally said.

This was where the children had found the raincoat. Snapped stalks and blackened fronds confirmed what the girls had told her. It was as if some horse had strayed into the crop and rolled on its back. "So the coat was spread out here?"

"Yes, Mummy."

"Like somebody had a picnic," Ally added.

May had a different, less wholesome thought she didn't voice. "And you didn't see anyone?"

They shook their heads.

"You're quite sure?"

"We were playing ball, and I threw it and it landed in the field. We were on our own. When we were looking for our ball we found the coat. Nobody wanted it, because we came back next day and it was still here and we thought let's put it on our scarecrow and see if Daddy notices. Was it Daddy who noticed?"

"Never mind that. You should have told me about the coat when you found it. Did you find anything else?"

"No, Mummy. If they'd wanted to keep the coat, they would have come back, wouldn't they?"

"Did you look in the pockets?"

"Yes, and they were empty. Mr. Scarecrow looks nicer with a coat."

"Much nicer," Ally said in support. "Doesn't he look nicer, Mummy?"

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May was not to be sidetracked. "You shouldn't have done what you did. It belongs to someone else."

"But they didn't want it, or they would have come back," Sarah said.

"You don't know. They could still come back."

"They could be dead."

"It would still be wrong to take it. I'm going to take it off the scarecrow and we'll hand it in to the police. It's lost property."

A full three days later, Mooney escorted a tall detective inspector through the crop. "You'll have to be damn quick with your investigating. This'll be ready for combining soon. Some of the pods are forming already."

"If it's a crime scene, Mr. Mooney, you're not doing anything to it."

"We called you about the coat last Monday, and no one came."

"A raincoat isn't much to get excited about. The gun is another matter."

Another matter that had finally brought the police here in a hurry. Mooney had found a Smith & Wesson in his field. A handgun.

"When did you pick it up?"

"This morning."

"What—taking a stroll, were you?"

Mooney didn't like the way the question was put, as if he'd been acting suspiciously. He'd done the proper thing, reported finding the weapon as soon as he picked it up. "I've got a right to walk in my own field."

"Through this stuff?"

"I promised my kids I'd find their ball—the ball that was missing the day they found the coat. I found the gun instead—about here." He stopped and parted some of the limp, blue-green leaves at the base of a plant.

To the inspector, this plant looked no different from the rest except that the trail ended here. He took a white disk from his pocket and marked the spot. "Careful with your feet. We'll want to check all this ground. And where was the Burberry raincoat?"

"On the scarecrow."

"I mean, where did your daughters find it?"

Mooney flapped his hand in a southerly direction. "About thirty yards off."

"Show me."

The afternoon was the hottest of the year so far. Thousands of bees were foraging in the rape flowers. Mooney didn't mind disturbing them, but the inspector was twitchy. He wasn't used to walking chest-high through fields. He kept close to the farmer, using his elbows to fend off the tall plants springing upright again.

Only a short distance ahead, the bluebottles were busy as well.

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Mooney stopped.

"Well, how about this?" He was stooping over something.

The inspector almost tumbled over Mooney's back. "What is it? What have you found?"

Mooney held it up. "My kids' ball. They'll be pleased you came."

"Let's get on."

"Do you smell anything, Inspector?"

In a few hours the police transformed this part of Middle Field. A large part of the crop was ruined, crushed under the feet of detectives, scene-of-crime officers, a police surgeon, a pathologist, and police photographers. Mooney was depressed by all the damage.

"You think the coat might have belonged to the owner of the cottages across the lane, is that right?" the inspector asked.

"I wouldn't know."

"It's what you told me earlier."

"That was my wife's idea. She says it's a posh coat. No one from round here wears a posh coat. Except him."

"Who is he?"

Mooney had to think about that. He'd put the name out of his mind. "White, as I recall. Jeremy White, from London. He bought the tied cottages from the developer who knocked them into one. He's doing them up, making a palace out of it, open plan, with marble floors and a spiral staircase."

"Doing them up himself?"

"He's a townie. What would he know about building work? No, he's given the job to Armstrong, the Devizes firm. Comes here each weekend to check on the work."

"Any family?"

"I wouldn't know about that." He looked away, across the field, to the new slate roof on the tied cottages. "I've seen a lady with him."

"A lady? What's she like?"

Mooney sighed, forced to think. "Dark-haired."

"Age?"

"Younger than him."

"The sale was in his name alone?"

"That's right."

"If you don't mind, Mr. Mooney, I'd like you to take another look at the corpse and see if you recognise anyone."

From the glimpse he'd had already, Mooney didn't much relish another look. "If I don't mind? Have I got a choice?"

Some of the crop had been left around the body like a screen. The police had used one access path so as not to destroy evidence. Mooney pressed his fingers to his nose and stepped up. He peered at the bloated features. Ten days in hot weather makes a difference. "Difficult," he said. "The hair looks about right."

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"For Jeremy White?"

"That reddish colour. Dyed, isn't it? I always thought the townie dyed his hair. He weren't so young as he wanted people to think he were."

"The clothes?"

Mooney looked at the pinstripe suit dusted faintly yellow from the crop. There were bullet holes in the jacket. "That's the kind of thing he wore, certainly."

The inspector nodded. "From the contents of his wallet, we're pretty sure this is Jeremy White. Do you recall hearing any shots last time he was here?"

"There are shots all the time, 'specially at weekends. Rabbits. Pigeons. We wouldn't take note of that."

"When did you see him last?"

"Two weekends ago. Passed him in the lane on the Sunday afternoon."

"Anyone with him?"

"That dark-haired young lady I spoke of."

The inspector produced the wallet found on the body and took out a photo of a dark-haired woman in a blue blouse holding up a drink. "Is this her?"

Mooney examined it for some time. He eyed the inspector with suspicion, as if he was being tricked. "That wasn't the lady I saw."

There was an interval when the buzzing of insects seemed to increase and the heat grew.

"Are you certain?"

"Positive."

"Take another look."

"Her with the townie was definitely younger."

The inspector's eyebrows lifted. "How much younger?"

"A good ten years, I'd say."

"Did they come by car?"

"There was always a sports car parked in front of the cottages when he came, one of them BMW jobs with the open top."

"Just the one vehicle? The lady didn't drive down in her own?"

"If she did, I've never seen it. When can I have my field back?"

"When I tell you. There's more searching to be done."

"More damage, you mean."

Mooney met Bernie Priddle with his dog the same evening, coming along the footpath beside the hedgerow. Bernie had lived in one of the tied cottages until Mooney decided to sell it. He was in his fifties, small, thin-faced, always ready with a barbed remark.

"You'll lose the whole of your crop by the look of it," he said, and he sounded happier than he had for months.

"I thought you'd turn up," Mooney said. "Makes you feel better to

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see someone else's misfortune, does it?"

"I walk the path around the field every evening. It's part of the dog's routine. You should know that by now. I was saying you'll lose your crop."

"Don't I know it! Even if they don't trample every stalk of it, they'll stop me from harvesting."

"People are saying it's the townie who was shot."

"That's my understanding."

"Good riddance, too."

"You want to guard what you say, Bernie Priddle. They're looking for someone to nail for this."

"Me? I wouldn't put myself in trouble for some pipsqueak yuppie. It's you I wouldn't mind doing a stretch for, Mooney. I could throttle you anytime for putting me out of my home."

"What are you moaning about? You got a council house out of it, didn't you? Hot water and an inside toilet. Where's your dog?"

Priddle looked down. His Jack Russell had moved on, and he didn't know where. He whistled.

Over by the body, all the heads turned.

"It's all right," Mooney shouted to the policemen. "He was calling his dog, that's all."

The inspector came over and spoke to Priddle. "And who are you exactly?"

Bernie explained about his regular evening walk around the field.

"Have you ever seen Mr. White, the owner of the tied cottages?"

"On occasion," Bernie said. "What do you want to know?"

"Ever seen anyone with him?"

"Last time—the Sunday before last—there was the young lady, her with the long black hair and short skirt. She's a good looker, that one. He was showing her the building work. Had his arm around her. I raised my cap to them, didn't speak. Later, when I was round the far side, I saw them heading into the field."

"Into the field? Where?"

"Over yonder. He had a coat on his arm. Next time I looked, they weren't in view." He grinned. "I drew my own conclusion, like, and walked on. I came right around the field before I saw the other car parked in the lane."

The inspector's interest increased. "You saw another car?"

"Nice little Jeep Cherokee, it was, red. Do you want the number?"

"Do you remember it?"

"It was a woman's name, SUE, followed by a number. I couldn't tell you which, except it was just the one."

"A single digit?" The inspector sounded pleased. "SUE, followed by a single digit. That's really useful, sir. We can check that. And did you see the driver?"

"No, I can't help you there."

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"Hear any shooting?"

"We often hear shooting in these parts. Look, I'd better find my dog."

"We'll need to speak to you some more, Mr. . . . ?"

"Priddle. Bernard Priddle. You're welcome. These days I live in one of them poky little council bungalows in the village. Second on the left."

The inspector watched him stride away, whistling for the dog, and said to one of the team, "A useful witness. I want you to take a statement from him."

Mooney was tempted to pass on the information that Bernie was a publicity-seeking pain in the arse, but he decided to let the police do their own work.

The body was removed from Middle Field the same evening. Some men in black suits put it into a bag with a zip and stretchered it over the well-trodden ground to a small van and drove off.

"Now can I have my field back?" Mooney asked the inspector.

"What's the hurry?"

"You've destroyed a big section of my crop. What's left will go over if I don't harvest it at the proper time. The pods shatter and it's too late."

"What do you use? A combine harvester?"

"First it has to be swathed into rows. It all takes time."

"I'll let you know in the morning. Cutting it could make our work easier. We want to do a bigger search."

"What for?"

"Evidence. We now know that the woman Bernard Priddle saw—the driver of the Jeep—was the woman in the photograph I showed you, Mrs. Susan White, the dead man's wife. We're assuming the younger woman was White's mistress. We think Mrs. White was suspicious and followed them here. She didn't know about him buying the tied cottages. That was going to be his love nest, just for weekends with the mistress. But he couldn't wait for it to be built. The wife caught them at it in the field."

"On the raincoat?"

"That's the assumption. Our forensic people may confirm it."

"Nasty shock."

"On both sides, no doubt."

Mooney smiled. "You could be right about that. So that's why he was shot. What happened to the mistress?"

"She must have escaped. Someone drove his car away and we reckon it was her."

"So have you arrested the wife?"

"Not yet. She wasn't at home when we called."

Mooney grinned again. "She guessed you were coming."

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"We'll catch up with her."

In a tree in the hedgerow a song thrush sounded its clear notes and was answered from across the field. A breeze was cooling the air.

On the insistence of the police, Mooney harvested his crop a week before it was ready. He'd cried wolf about all the bother they'd caused, and now he suffered a loss through cutting too early. To make matters worse, not one extra piece of evidence was found, for all their fingertip searches through the stubble.

"Is that the end of it?" he asked the inspector when the final sweep across the field was made. The land looked black and bereft. Only the scarecrow remained standing. They'd asked him to leave it to use as a marker.

"It's the end of my work, but you'll be visited again. The lawyers will want to look at the site before the case comes to court."

"When will that be?"

"I can't say. Could be months. A year, even."

"There won't be anything to see."

"They'll look at the positions where the gun was found, and the body, and the coat. They map it all out."

"So are you advising me not to drill next spring?"

"That's an instruction, not advice. Not this field, anyway."

"It's my livelihood. Will I get compensation?"

"I've no idea. Not my field, if you'll forgive the pun."

"So you found the wife in the end?"

"Susan White—yes. She's helping us with our enquiries, as we like to put it."

"How about the mistress? Did you catch up with her?"

"Not yet. We don't even know who she is."

"Maybe the wife shot her as well."

"That's why we had you cutting your crop, in case of a second body. But we're pretty certain she drove off in the BMW. It hasn't been traced yet."

Winter brought a few flurries of snow and some gales. The scarecrow remained standing. The building work on the tied cottages was halted and no one knew what was happening about them.

"I should have drilled by now," Mooney said, staring across the field.

"Are they ever going to come back, do you think?" his wife said.

"He said it would take a long time."

"I suppose the wife has been in prison all these months waiting for the trial to start. I can't help feeling sorry for her."

"If you shoot your husband, you must get what's coming to you," Mooney said.

"She had provocation. Men who cheat on their wives don't get

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any sympathy from me."

"Taking a gun to them is a bit extreme."

"Quick and merciful."

Mooney gave her a look. There had been a time before the children came along when their own marriage had gone through a crisis, but he'd never been unfaithful.

The lawyers came in April. Two lots in the same week. They took photos and made measurements, regardless that the field looked totally different to the way it had last year. After the second group—the prosecution team—had finished, Mooney asked if he could sow the new crop now. Spring rape doesn't give the yield of a winter crop, but it's better than nothing.

"I wouldn't," the lawyer told him. "It's quite possible we'll bring out the jury to see the scene of the crime."

"It's a lot of fuss, when we all know she did it."

"It's justice, Mr. Mooney. She must have a fair trial."

And you must run up your expenses, he thought. They'd driven up in their Porsches and Mercedeses and lunched on fillet steak at the pub. The law was a good racket.

But as things turned out, the jury weren't brought to see the field. The trial took place a year after the killing, and Mooney was allowed to sow another crop. The first thing he did was take down that scarecrow and destroy it. He wasn't a superstitious man, but he associated the wretched thing with his run of bad luck. He'd been told it had been photographed for the papers. Stupid. They'd photograph any damned thing to fill a page. Someone told him they'd called his land "The Killing Field." Things like that were written by fools for fools to read. When a man has to be up at sunrise, he doesn't have time for papers. By the evening they're all out of date.

An evil thing had happened in Middle Field, but Mooney was determined to treat it as just a strip of land like any other. Personally, he had no worries about working the soil. He put the whole morbid incident to the back of his mind.

Until one evening in September.

He'd drilled the new sowing of oilseed, and was using the roller, working late to try and get the job finished before the light went altogether. A huge harvest moon appeared while he was still at work. He was thinking of supper, driving the tractor in near darkness along the last length beside the footpath, when a movement close to the hedge caught his eye.

If the figure had kept still, he would have driven straight past. The face turned and was picked out by his headlights. A woman. Features he'd seen before.

He braked and got down.

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She was already walking on. He ran after her and shouted, "Hey!"

She turned, and he knew he wasn't mistaken. She was the woman in the photograph the police had shown him, Sue White, the killer, the wife of the dead man.

"What the devil are you doing here?" he asked.

"Walking the footpath. It's allowed, isn't it?" She was calm for an escaped convict.

Mooney's heart pumped faster. He peered through the fading light to be certain he wasn't mistaken. "Who are you?"

"My name is Sue White. Are you all right?"

Mooney wasn't all right. He'd just had a severe shock. His ears were ringing and his vision was going misty. He reached out towards the hedge to support himself. His hand clutched at nothing and he fell.

The paramedics attended to him by flashlight in the field where he'd fallen. "You'll need to be checked," one of them said, "but I don't think this is a heart attack. More of a shock reaction. The blood pressure falls and you faint. Have you had anything like it before?"

Mooney shook his head. "But it were a shock, all right, seeing that woman. How did she escape?"

"*Escape?* Just take it easy, Mr. Mooney."

"She's on the run from prison. She could be dangerous."

"Listen, Mr. Mooney. It's only thanks to Mrs. White that we got here at all. She used her mobile."

"Maybe, but she's still a killer."

"Come off it. You're talking about the man who was shot in your own field, and you don't know who did it? It was all over the papers. Don't you read them?"

"I don't have time for the papers."

"It was his mistress that killed him. She's serving life now."

"His mistress? But the wife caught them at it."

"Yes, and that's how the mistress found out for certain that he had a wife. She'd got her suspicions already and was carrying the gun in her bag to get the truth out of him, or so she claimed at the trial. She saw red and shot him after Mrs. White showed up."

His voice shook. "So Mrs. White is innocent?"

"Totally. We've been talking to her. She came down today to look at those cottages. She's the owner now. She'll sell them if she's got any sense. I mean, who'd want a home looking out over the Killing Field?"

They helped Mooney to the gate and into the ambulance. Below the surface of Middle Field, the moist soil pressed against the seeds. ●

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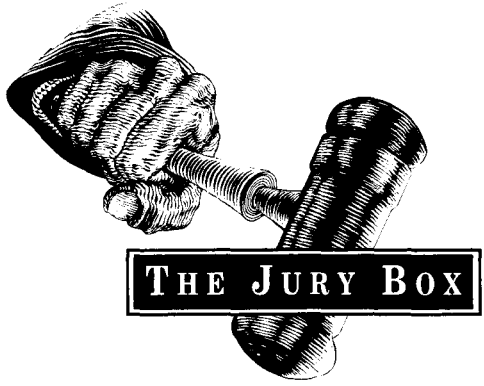

by Jon L. Breen

Once virtually all worthy mystery fiction appearing in United States book form came from commercial publishers centered in New York City. But today some of the best books come from a wide range of regional, print-on-demand, import, and specialized houses, even university presses. Consider the following roundup.

**** Gary Zebrun: *Someone You Know,* Alyson, $13.95. Providence, Rhode Island, journalist David Caruso, who has concealed his homosexuality from his wife and teenage daughter, must confront the effects of his lies when he becomes the target of a serial killer. This astonishing first novel combines excellent prose, dialogue, and character drawing with throat-gripping suspense that invites comparison with Hitchcock, Woolrich, and Charlotte Armstrong. Admittedly, many readers will see the main surprise coming, and the explicit homoeroticism may be too much for some.

**** Annette Meyers, *Repentances,* Five Star, $25.95. An extraordinary novel of repressed memory begins in 1936 New York with a specialist in helping Jewish family members flee Europe for the U.S.A. and a client who has already paid in full but does not know his wife and daughter have died in an apartment fire back in Poland. A tragic chain of events extends over the next fourteen years, centering on a young art student whose true origins have been kept from her. The action is compelling, the plot turns surprising, the period and people vividly captured. The title refers to the painted-over "ghosts" that sometimes appear as oil paint ages.

**** Hal Glatzer: *A Fugue in Hell's Kitchen,* Perseverance, $13.95. A prequel to the very impressive *Too Dead to Swing* finds violinist and sax player Katy Green in a classical rather than pop music setting, seeking a vanished autograph Paganini composition in 1939 Manhattan. The evocation of

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time and place is note-perfect, the musical background richly detailed, the narration and character drawing bright and varied, the surprise solution generously clued.

*** Joseph Commings: *Banner Deadlines: The Impossible Files of Senator Brooks U. Banner.* Crippen & Landru, $29 cloth, $17 trade paper. Banner, a larger-than-life locked-room specialist in the tradition of John Dickson Carr's Dr. Fell and Sir Henry Merrivale, is even better than I remembered. Ingenious impossible crimes are solved in 13 tales from various pulps and digests between 1947 and 1984, plus one new to print. Robert Adey contributes a fine introduction and Edward D. Hoch (who collaborated on one of the stories) adds a personal memoir. If the other Banner cases on the accompanying checklist are of comparable quality, let's have a second volume.

*** Claudia Gross, *Scholarium,* translated from the German by Helen Atkins, Toby Press, $19.95. In Cologne of 1413, university students and faculty wrestle with the great philosophical questions while seeking a murderer in their midst. Intellectually rigorous and well written (and/or well translated), it should appeal to fans of academic, historical, and feminist mysteries, though it doesn't quite deliver the classical puzzle promised early. It takes some suspension of disbelief that the first victim's widow, whose unseemly thirst for knowledge leads her to disguise herself as a man, fools even those who know her in both incarnations—but it worked for Shakespeare, didn't it?

*** Daniel J. Hale and Matthew LaBrot, *Green Streak,* Top Publications, $8.95. Early-teen sleuth Zeke Armstrong, whose first case *Red Card* (2002) won an Agatha award for best children's/young adult mystery, goes to Manhattan for an inline skating competition and ferrets out villains with designs on an elderly lady's fortune. This fast-paced, smoothly written and constructed book delivers the brisk action and intriguing mystery kids want, along with educational nuggets and positive values to please their parents. Co-author LaBrot is himself a teenager.

*** Laurence M. Janifer, *Two,* Wildside, $15.95. The final book from the author, who died in 2002, is a science fiction/formal detection hybrid that will appeal to fans of Isaac Asimov's robot novels. Series sleuth Gerald Knave's usual job is checking out the habitability of other planets, but here he looks into the apparent snatching and replacement with a duplicate (in a post-Clean Slate War Columbus, Ohio!) of the Emperor's daughter. Those unfamiliar with the series may be slow to get into it, but it's worth the effort.

*** John R. Corrigan: *Snap Hook,* Hardscrabble Crime/University Press of New England, $24.95. The second case for sleuthing PGA golfer Jack

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Austin is a considerable advance over *Cut Shot* (2001). The detailed golf action and inside account of the PGA tour carry more interest than the serviceable plot. Other pluses are Austin's complex relationships with his inner-city-project caddy and his CBS commentator girlfriend and his pondering of some splendid passages from the poetry of Philip Levine.

** Keith Miles, *Honolulu Play-Off,* Poisoned Pen, $24.95. The latest about another golfing sleuth, British pro Alex Saxon, has little golf action but a pleasant Hawaiian setting and, initially at least, a more intriguing plot. The prolific Miles, who also writes as Edward Marston and Conrad Allen, is no great stylist but a practiced and versatile storyteller.

** Michael Mallory: *Murder in the Bath,* Deadly Alibi, $16.95. In 1905, Amelia Watson travels to Bath when the husband of a former charge from her governess days is accused of murder. Sherlock Holmes never appears but is a constant offstage presence—the second Mrs. Watson, a well-realized character with a distinctive humorous voice, can't stand the Baker Street sleuth so important to her husband's literary career. The neat puzzle, historical touches, and well-managed scenes make it easy to overlook the downsides: a murderer any experienced reader is sure to spot and a failure of editing that will have grammarians and proofreaders tearing their hair.

** Carole Spearin McCauley, *Cold Steal,* Hilliard & Harris, $28.95 hardcover, $16.95 trade paper. A stronger editorial hand would also have helped this first in a prospective series about bisexual medical journalist Pauli Golden, who looks into the murder of a detestable gynecologist and former lover. While the novel begins and ends weakly, it is very well written, has an interesting cancer research background, and gathers considerable impetus midway. Though the author and setting are American, the novel was originally published in Britain by the Women's Press in 1991.

** Jerry Buck, *A Blood Red Rose,* Five Star, $25.95. Hollywood mystery scripter Pete Castle looks into the forty-year-old murder of a star and finds his own father, a stuntman turned studio security chief, may be implicated. Apart from references to cell phones and e-mail, this light, predictable, reasonably diverting whodunit, with a touch of show-bizzy paranormal, might have been written fifty years ago.

French pioneer Maurice Leblanc, creator of thief and detective Arsene Lupin, was an acknowledged influence on the Ellery Queen team. Among several of his books recently reprinted by Wildside is the 1910 novel *813* ($45 hardcover; $22.95 trade paper), which editor Queen in the 1945 anthology *Rogue's Gallery* called "an indestructible classic of adventure, crime, and detection."

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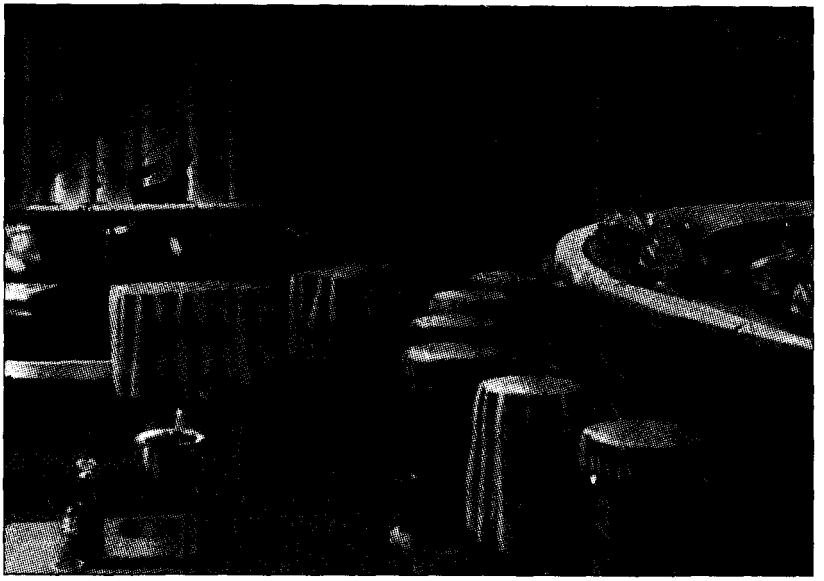

Art by Mark Evans

THE GIN MILL

by Doug Allyn

Sunday morning in Malverne, a quaint little resort town dreaming on the shores of Lake Michigan. Autumn in the air, maples and elm trees streaked with auburn and burnished gold, the sweet scent of burning leaves perfuming the breeze. Lawns trimmed, sidewalks swept. Older homes faithfully maintained. The kind of town where people walk to church of a Sunday morning.

Not me. I was here strictly for the money. Scrounging for work on my day off.

Driving slowly, I threaded my pickup through the downtown business district. What there was of it. Like many western Michigan towns, Malverne was on hard times. I knew the feeling.

My computer map was perfect. Took us straight to the Belknap Building.

The old red-brick five-and-dime store towered above its neighbors, five stories tall, filling half a block. At street level, its display windows were soaped over, filled with crudely lettered signs. *FINAL DAYS! GOING OUT OF BUSINESS! EVERYTHING*

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MUST GO! From the shabby look of things, everything had gone. A long time ago.

A few windows in the second story still had glass in them. The upper stories were completely closed up, rows of gabled windows blinded with weather-stained plywood panels, eyeless and forlorn.

"Dynamite," Puck said grimly.

I glanced at him.

"Four sticks. We plant one at each corner, blow this baby into a big-ass brick pile, truck her to a landfill, and start over."

"C'mon, it's not that bad." A major difference between us. Eyeing that relic of a building, Puck saw nothing but headaches. I saw a big-budget remodeling job that would keep my construction crew working indoors through the winter. Assuming the old brick monstrosity didn't come crashing down on our heads the first time somebody sneezed.

If there's one thing six-time Readers Award winner Doug Allyn knows how to do, it's to create characters readers want to see again. Though the phenomenal storyteller says he doesn't like the idea of creating ongoing series, he often ends up doing so due to the popularity of his creations. The cast of the following story's a good example: We saw them last year in the Readers Award-winning "Palace in the Pines." Mr. Allyn's new novel is *The Burning of Rachel Hayes* (Five Star). ✝

A new SUV pulled to the curb behind my pickup truck. A woman climbed out. Big woman. I'm six foot and she looked almost as tall. Dressed in denim, matching jeans and jacket, fashionably faded. So was she. Late thirties, easing into forty. Raven hair showing a few flecks of gray, careworn eyes. But still a very handsome package.

Puck and I joined her on the sidewalk.

"Mr. Shea? I'm Olympia Belknap. Pia, for short. Thanks for coming." We shook hands, looking each other over. I was wearing a sport coat over a flannel shirt, jeans. Work boots. Hadn't shaved for a day or two. North-country business chic.

"Sunday's a down day for us anyway, Mrs. Belknap. This is my foreman, Dolph Paquette. Puck, to his friends. And everybody else."

"Ma'am." Puck nodded. A long speech, for him.

"Have you looked over the floor plans?" she asked.

"I checked them, but Puck hasn't. Why don't you run the project past us?"

"All right. Simply put, Central Michigan University plans to build a satellite campus on the far side of the river. Six thousand students. I want to convert this white elephant of a building into off-campus housing. The ground floor will be subdivided into four

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units of commercial space. I already have options for two of them, a Borders bookstore and a Radio Shack. They'll supply their own requirements once the building is up to code. The other two units are to be prepped for rental: cleaned, carpeted, wiring and lighting brought up to commercial standards. Are you with me so far?"

"You haven't scared us off yet. Go on."

"I want the four upper floors converted to condominium-sized apartments, eight per floor. Each unit will consist of three bedrooms, two baths, full kitchen facilities. In addition, each floor will have its own laundry room, fitness center, tanning salon, and a communal game room with large-screen televisions and state-of-the-art Internet hookups. How does that strike you?"

"Like a place I'd like to live but couldn't afford."

"I meant as a project, Mr. Shea," she said impatiently. "Is it something you're interested in doing or not?"

"I don't know yet. It depends on the condition of the structure. If the building's solid, then the project should be feasible. Can we do a walk-through?"

"Certainly. This way." She set off at a pace so brisk I had to trot to catch up. Puck didn't bother, taking his time, looking things over. Pia Belknap unlocked the dime store's front doors first. Run-down counters, grimy linoleum-tiled floors, fluorescent tubes hanging on rusty chains from the high ceiling. About what I expected. A mess. But fixable.

"Do you have a timetable in mind?" I asked doubtfully.

"It's mid October now. Ideally, I'd like the first floor finished by Christmas, the apartments above prepped and ready by next July. Is that possible?"

I glanced the question at Puck.

He nodded. "Structure looks sound. The guys who did the original brickwork were craftsmen. Building must be a hundred years old, should last another hundred easy. Some of the bearing walls have been knocked out but the jack posts are still in place. Rebuild the partitions, level the floor, rewire everything from the ground up. Having the first floor ready by Christmas shouldn't be a problem."

"Okay," I said. Puck Paquette is a rangy, wind-burned Canuck who moves slow and talks slower. Impatient people assume he's lazy or even stupid. He's neither. He's a deliberate man.

Like me, he learned this trade from the business end of a hammer. He's good with machinery and men, not so hot with figures. Puck couldn't price out a job like this if his life depended on it. But he definitely knows whether a project is doable and what it'll take to make it happen.

"Shall we continue?" Pia Belknap asked.

The second floor was a rabbit warren of small rooms, dusty,

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dimly lit. Apparently they'd been used for storage during the dime store's heyday. The wallpaper was faded, but the partitions looked solid, even the doors still hung true.

Puck and I were more interested in the outer walls. No staining or bowing; they looked as solid as the day they were put up. Our eyes met; Puck nodded.

I glanced down the long corridor, frowning. "What was this place? Originally, I mean?"

"It was a combination lumberman's hotel and mercantile building, built by my late husband's great-grandfather. There were shops and a general store on the ground floor, hotel rooms above. In a sense, we'll be restoring it to what it once was."

"Only better, I hope," I said. "Let's see the rest of it."

"Actually, this is as far as we can go. The building hasn't been occupied for more than twenty years and the stairways to the upper floors were sealed off even then. I haven't been able to find a way up, but according to the original plans, the floors above are more of the same."

"We'll need to see the roof," Puck said.

"There's a fire escape out back. Will that do?"

It did. The rear of the building faced a parking lot, with a loading dock probably used by wagons when it was built. Still, the fire escape seemed as sound as the rest of it, heavy wrought iron that barely vibrated as Puck and I made our way up to the roof, leaving Mrs. Belknap pacing impatiently below.

A long climb, but worth it. One hell of a view. Across the parking lot, an old factory as vacant as the Belknap Building. Beyond it to the west, Lake Michigan rolled away into the glittering distance. Ashore, the town spread out around us, quaint as an Amish quilt draped over the foothills. Higher up, multistory mansions stood like sentries overlooking the village.

"What do you think?" I asked.

"Definitely a fine-lookin' woman. And a rich widow to boot? Wish to hell I was twenty years younger."

"So do I, Puck. What about the job?"

"I'd say it's doable, Danny. Roof's sound, no sign of termites or water damage below, which is the big worry in a box this old. Walls look solid, almost perfect, in fact. Five stories of brickwork, not a crack or a bulge. They don't build 'em like this no more."

"It's outdated, though. The wiring will have to be completely replaced."

"That won't be so tough. Electricity was still new at the turn of the century when this sucker went up, so they ran the wiring in exposed conduits alongside the plumbing. It'll be easy to get at."

"How do you know it was built at the turn of the century?"

"See that big water tank at the corner of the roof? Before nine-

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teen ten, water pressure in small towns couldn't climb above two stories. Taller buildings like this one had to have their own tanks. I'd guess this one went up in, say . . . eighteen ninety-six."

"Wow, you're exactly right," I said, surprised. "The date was on the plans she sent me. I'm impressed. How could you guess that from a water tank?"

"Because the date's stamped on the side, you young punk." Puck grinned. "We gonna take this job or not?"

"Looks workable to me and the lady can afford it. The Belknaps own half of this town and then some. Old money."

"New, old, just so it spends. We'll have to add some crew, a couple gofers, and at least one finish carpenter for the interior work."

"We're only forty miles north of Grand Rapids here. Should be able to pick 'em up locally. Let's nail this deal down before the lady changes her mind."

Ten days later, we invaded. Rolled into Malverne after dark, a caravan of work vans and pickup trucks. A gypsy construction crew, eight men plus Puck and me. North-country boys from up around Valhalla. Wild and woolly and rough around the edges. Hard workers who knew their trades.

We ripped into the Belknap Building like a wrecking crew, gutting the old storefront, tearing out counters, ripping up the tile floor. Filled three dumpsters with debris the first day, another three on the second. By then we were working in the glare of generator lights as the electricians ran new power lines in from the street to the basement.

Pia Belknap checked in every day to see how we were doing, but she didn't kibitz and didn't hang around long. Which was good. Pretty women and construction sites are a risky mix. They can break your heart. Or make you saw off your hand.

Work on the first floor went quicker than expected. But as we began moving up to the second floor we hit major problems.

Puck guessed right, the building's original wiring was neatly boxed in with the plumbing. But nothing else was where it was supposed to be.

Walls didn't line up. Stairways were missing, apparently torn out or walled over. Crazy as it sounds, we couldn't find access to the upper floors anywhere in the building. Even the power lines ended at the second floor.

"I don't understand," Pia Belknap said, frowning over the blueprints I had spread out on a table in an empty second-floor office. "These are the plans registered with the zoning board."

"My guess is the building was remodeled at some point and for some reason they didn't register those changes. Maybe they were

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trying to avoid zoning or building codes. Is there anyone who might be able to tell us what was done?"

"My husband's grandfather worked here many years ago," she said doubtfully. "I can ask, but he may not remember. Some days he's a little hazy about who I am."

"I have days like that myself." I sighed. "Look, this isn't a deal breaker, Mrs. Belknap. I can redraw the plans as we go, but meanwhile we're working blind. An updated set of blueprints would be a huge help."

After she left, I scanned the plans again, trying to make sense of the measurements. Couldn't. They simply didn't line up. Hell, even the office I was in was the wrong size. According to the drawings, this room was supposed to be twelve foot by eighteen, but it was obviously smaller. I quickly paced it off. Twelve by twelve, period. Not an inch more.

So what happened to the missing six feet? Frustrated, I grabbed a hammer and pounded a fist-sized hole through the wallboard. And saw the inside of the wallboard to the next room. An ordinary partition, six inches thick, tops.

Crossing to the opposite wall, I repeated the process. Or tried to. The hammer chipped the wallboard but rebounded. This wall was solid. And it shouldn't have been. According to the drawings, the building's outer walls were plaster laid over lath. I should have punched through it easily.

Frowning, I examined the wall more carefully. And found a seam in the corner almost perfectly concealed by the vertical molding strip. A false wall.

I pressed it, trying to gauge its strength, and it moved. Slid slightly to the left. Easing the hammer claw into the gap, I moved it a little further . . . and it just kept on going. Disappeared neatly into the adjoining wall. A sliding panel. That concealed a freight elevator.

I'll be damned. What was this about? I stepped into the cage, felt it shudder a little under my feet, giving me pause. How old was this contraption?

No roof on it, only a yoke supported by heavy steel cables that snaked up into the yawning darkness overhead.

Couldn't see a thing up there. The building's power was off and the generator-powered work lights in the office only cast shadows in the elevator. Grabbing a flashlight off my worktable, I played it around overhead.

An empty shaft, three stories, straight up. Couldn't see a landing on the next floor up. Or even the one above that. Apparently this elevator went from the basement to the top floor. Which made no sense at all. Why go to all this trouble to conceal it?

No floor numbers on the controls, just three buttons: up, down,

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stop. I glanced around, wondering how many years ago this relic had been boxed in, and why. I absently tapped one of the buttons—and the elevator lurched upward!

Stumbling back, I banged off the wall and went down. The elevator cage was still climbing upward, bucking beneath me like a ship in a hurricane. Somewhere in the dark a lift motor was howling like a mad thing, straining to shift rusty cables as stiff as steel beams. Naked light bulbs flared to life in the shaft overhead, revealing quivering wire ropes, then exploding, raining down fiery sparks and broken glass.

The cage was shaking so fiercely I couldn't get to my feet. So I crawled across the bucking floor on hands and knees, groping for the off switch—

With a deafening bang, something snapped. The cage floor dropped out from under me, plunging six or eight feet before jerking to a halt, slamming me into the floor face-first, knocking my wind out.

And then I was scrambling desperately to get out of the way as the elevator cable came whistling down out of the dark, crashing into the cage, whirling around like a crazed snake, gouging the walls and floor as it coiled and recoiled on itself.

Its jagged head tore into my jeans, slashing my leg open—and then, suddenly, everything stopped. I sat up slowly, my head ringing like an alarm bell, shin on fire, blood oozing through my torn Levi's.

Puck's face appeared in the opening above, ashen, wide-eyed.

"Danny? You okay?"

"I don't know."

"What the hell happened?"

"Don't know that, either." Swallowing, I took a deep breath, then got slowly to my feet, taking inventory. Both arms and legs worked all right, no bones broken. Left shoulder was sore as hell where I landed on it.

Checked my leg. The ragged end of the broken cable had sliced a five-inch gash across my shin. Bleeding pretty good, but it didn't look too deep. Shin cuts always bleed a lot.

Okay. Working construction, hard knocks come with the territory. I was banged up, but not seriously. No thanks to the Belknap Building. That broken steel cable could just as easily have taken off my head.

"Danny?"

"I'm okay, Puck. The freakin' building just tried to kill me, is all."

"What happened?"

"Damned if I know. I hit the switch and the elevator kicked on but the cables were too rusty to take the strain. One snapped. Cage dropped half a story before the automatic brakes grabbed it."

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"What do you mean, it kicked on? There's no juice in here. The mains are disconnected, all the power to the building is completely off."

"All I know is this cage jumped the second I hit the switch. Motor sounded like it was above me, so there must be juice up there somewhere and we'd better find it before somebody gets fried. I've had enough surprises out of this place. Slide a ladder down here before this damned cage drops me into the basement!"

No need to see a doctor. Mafe Rochon patched me up. Mafe is Ojibwa, full-blood. Hard drinker, serious bar-fighter, a major attitude case. We've tangled more than once. I put up with him because he's, swear to God, a genius with a torch. Mafe can cut metal or join it together so seamlessly you can scarcely see the line. But when you hire Mafe for his talent, his craziness comes with the deal.

As a bonus, I got an on-the-job medic, a skill Mafe picked up in the army before they booted him out. He's a fair hand at patching people back together. He's even better at busting them up.

Mafe was taping up my leg when Olympia Belknap showed up for her daily update.

"My God," she said, paling at my ragged, bloodstained jeans. "What happened?"

"Nothing heavy. Broken cable. On the upside, I solved our bogus floor-plan problem. There's a false wall at the east end of the building that conceals a freight elevator. Looks like there's another false wall at the opposite end, too. Puck's up on the roof, trying to find a way down. . . ."

I broke off, listening to a strange shuffling sound. Footsteps, coming closer. From somewhere inside the walls.

Easing down off the table, I walked down the corridor, listening, as the footsteps drew closer. Mafe and Pia followed.

The sound stopped. So did I. Facing a blank wall.

"Danny?" Puck's voice was muffled. "You out there?"

"Yeah. Where are you?"

"Back away from the wall, this thing's nailed shut." A couple of resounding kicks, and suddenly the wall burst outward. Swung open, actually. A concealed door, blended perfectly to match the paneling. Just inside, Puck was standing on a stairway, dusting himself off.

"Come on up," he said quietly. "You've gotta see this."

"The third and fourth floors are old hotel rooms," he explained as we followed him up the stairway. "Once they sealed the doors off on the second floor, there was no other way up."

"I don't get it," I said. "They aren't just closed off, they're hidden."

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"You'll see why in a minute."

The stairway ended on the fifth-floor landing, facing a magnificent double door. Oaken, with leaded-glass panels.

I pushed through it, and stopped. Stunned.

It was a nightclub. A long, low-ceilinged room, filled with tables. A massive oaken bar at one end, bandstand at the other, facing a large dance floor with a mirrored ball turning slowly overhead, filling the room with swirling lights. Only a few lamps along the walls were still functional, but even in their wan glow, you could see how strange it all was.

The tables were still draped with dusty linen; some had plates, glasses, and silverware still in place, as though the revelers had just stepped out for a moment. Music stands still filled the stage, and there was a microphone up front. The bar still appeared to be stocked with liquor. . . .

A long sigh filled the room. As though the building were taking a deep breath. It sounded so . . . human, we all took an involuntary step closer to each other.

Puck glanced the question at me, eyes wide.

"Probably the wind," I shrugged. "Or maybe an air vent opening. The place has been closed up a long time."

"It doesn't look like it," Olympia said, wandering slowly among the tables. "Except for the dust, it could have closed ten minutes ago. Look, some of the plates still have food on them, or what's left of it. What happened here? Where did the people go?"

"It's your building," I said. "Don't you know?"

"I'm not from Malverne; I never heard of this town before I married Bob. When I asked his grandfather about the problems with the floor plans, he just said to stay away from this building. That it's a terrible place."

"What did he mean by that?"

"I have no idea. I told you he's a little drifty sometimes. That was all he'd say and it was the longest conversation I've had with him in months."

"I see," I nodded, though I really didn't. "In that case, do you know anyone else we can ask?"

"It was called the Gin Mill," Artie Cohen said, looking around the room, grinning like a schoolboy. He even looked like one, a gawky, fifty-year-old schoolboy with an unruly salt-and-pepper mop, sweater vest, and bow tie. Editor of the *Malverne Banner*, amateur historian. "My father told me about this place when I was a kid. I assumed it had all been torn out years ago."

"Obviously not," Pia Belknap said impatiently. "What can you tell us about it?"

"Quite a bit, I think. This building was originally a hotel, built

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for the lumber trade around the turn of the century. By the 'twenties, the lumber was gone, so when Prohibition came in, the Belknaps converted the top floor of the hotel to a blind pig."

"A blind—?" Pia echoed.

"Blind pig, speakeasy. An illegal drinking establishment. A gin mill. A very classy one, I might add. Wow. Being in here is like stepping back in time. Look at that bar."

"It's great," I agreed. "So what happened to the place?"

"When Prohibition ended, they tried going legit, but things were tough in Malverne during the Depression. A lot of businesses closed, including the hotel. Then World War Two came along and saved everybody."

"How so?"

"The town boomed. Literally. Guncotton, a component in artillery shells, can be made from tag alder, a trash tree that grows wild around here. The Belknaps built a plant to process the stuff, and landed a big government contract. Which is where the trouble started. Malverne's a small town. So many men had already enlisted there was almost no local labor available."

"What did they do?"

"They brought in blacks," Cohen said simply. "There's a village nearby called Idlewild, a black enclave in those days. Cyrus hired nearly two hundred colored folks to work in the plant. And when locals refused to rent rooms to them, he put them up in this hotel. And reopened the nightclub. As a black and tan—a place where blacks and whites could mix. Remember, in those days most of the country still had Jim Crow laws. Segregation was the rule, even in little backwaters like this one."

"So this was a black nightclub?" Olympia said, glancing around the room, taking it all in.

"More or less," Artie agreed. "And the place was a gold mine. Had a built-in crowd from the hotel. Cy hired a colored band from Detroit, Coley Barnes and the . . . Barnstormers, I think they were called. A big band. People flocked here from all over—Grand Rapids, Detroit, even Chicago. The place rebuilt the Belknap family fortune . . ." He trailed off, reading the surprise in Olympia's face. "I'm sorry, I meant no offense."

"None taken. I knew Bob's family was wealthy, I just assumed . . . you know. Business or real estate, that sort of thing."

"They did all of those things later, but their original bundle came from bootlegging, guncotton, and this gin mill."

"What happened to the place?" I asked. "Why was it abandoned like this?"

"There was a holdup," Artie said. "The summer of 'forty-five. The war was ending, so the government canceled the munitions contract. The Belknaps had to lay off the workers and close the fac-

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tory, which pretty much emptied the hotel. Old Cy tried to keep the club operating, but there was no business. He was getting ready to close it down when Coley Barnes did it for him."

"The bandleader?" Olympia said.

"Yep. Held the place up at gunpoint, roughed some people up, and took off with the money and another man's wife. The Gin Mill closed down that night, never reopened."

"Until now," Pia Belknap said quietly. I glanced at her.

"Look at this place," she continued, walking slowly around the dance floor. "The bar, the bandstand, all these authentic fixtures? This place has an incredible retro atmosphere you couldn't replicate for a million dollars. And it's already here, free and clear. Could you bring the Gin Mill up to code, Mr. Shea?"

"I suppose so," I said, chewing my lip. "It'll need to be rewired, but we planned to do that anyway. The plumbing and light fixtures will have to be updated, but beyond that . . ." I shrugged. "Hell, the place looks like it closed a few weeks ago. How much trouble can it be?"

A lot.

I had Puck scope out the saloon while I rode herd on the crew remodeling the first-floor storefronts. At street level, we were well ahead of schedule. Which was a good thing. Because the upper floors were another story.

"Thing is, the Gin Mill may have *closed* in 'forty-five, but it was built back during Prohibition," Puck explained. We were at the Lakefront Diner, a little mom-and-pop joint just up the street from the Belknap. Our unofficial lunch-break spot. Cheap grub, draft beer in Mason jars. My kind of place.

The crew was at a large table, scarfing down enough chow for a small army. Puck and I were sharing a booth in the corner.

"The biggest problem is the wiring. They ran it in from the factory across the parking lot, snaked it up phony drains so it wouldn't show on the hotel's electric bill."

"So? We'll have to replace it anyway."

"Hell, Danny, we can't even turn it off without getting access to the old guncotton factory and it's locked down tight as a drum."

"No kidding? So what's it like inside?"

"About what you'd expect." Puck grinned. "I got in through the skylight. The place folded the same time as the Gin Mill. Looks like they just turned off the lights and locked the doors. All the machinery's still in place and some of the storage rooms even have guncotton in them."

"Is it dangerous?"

"Nah. It'll burn but that's all. They only made the raw material here. The explosives were added to it somewhere else. I found the

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electric power lines against the back wall. I shut them down, but they'll have to be disconnected."

"Good. What else?"

"That water reservoir tank on the roof? It holds a couple thousand gallons, and it's nearly full. Must weigh seven, eight tons."

"Dangerous?"

"Nah. Tank's in good shape and the building could support one twice that size. Still, it's a lot of weight, and we should drain it, only the pipes were cut off years ago. We'll need a permit to pump it into the storm drains."

"I'll get one and—"

"Dan Shea?"

I glanced up. Three men, one in a suit, two in work clothes like my guys. All big.

"I'm Jack Romanik," the guy in the suit said. "Carpenters and Laborers Union, Local 486. You called my office a few days ago looking for some men." He eased his bulk into the booth without asking. Puck slid over to give him room. Romanik needed it. Lard ass, roll of flab around the middle, pasty face, double chins. Razor-cut hair worn collar-length. Manicured nails buffed to a soft shine. Not exactly a working stiff. He didn't offer to shake hands. Neither did I.

"Actually, I called last week, Mr. Romanik, but who's counting? I need two journeymen and a finish carpenter. Hard workers. Can you help me out?"

"Three men? You're sure there's nothing else I can do for you, Shea? Give you a back rub, maybe?"

"I don't follow you."

"Then I'll spell it out." He leaned across the table, his face inches from mine. "You come into my town with your raggedy-ass backwoods crew, steal a big job away from my people, then you want us to help you out?"

"Hey, I didn't *steal* this job, Mr. Romanik, I bid for it like everybody else. We won it fair and square, and all my guys are in the union, so what's your problem?"

"I don't have a problem, Shea, you do. You stole a job that's too big for you. You need at least six more men."

"Three will do fine."

"And three's what you'll get. But you'll carry six on your payroll."

"Ah. I get three workers, but pay for six? And the three no-shows, they'd be you and your two pals here, right?"

"Who they are is none of your business, Shea. Consider it a tax for poaching."

"Poaching?" Puck echoed. "Sonny, I was in the union when you were still—"

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"Put a cork in it, Pops, nobody's talking to you." Romanik didn't even look at Puck. Too busy trying to stare me down. Big mistake.

Puck glanced the question at me. I gave him a "Why not?" shrug. And Puck popped him. Clipped Romanik with his elbow, just above the ear. The blow only traveled about five inches. And fifty-odd years. But it hit Romanik so hard his eyes rolled back. He was out cold before his face bounced off the table.

"Damn it, Puck!" I griped, sliding out of the booth. "Look what you did! The guy's gonna bleed all over my hash browns." By now I was up, facing Romanik's thugs, who were still staring in stunned surprise. "Just chill out, fellas," I whispered. "Don't buy into this."

The goons looked past me. Mafe Rochon and my crew were already up and grinning, eyes alight at the prospect of kicking some ass for dessert.

The biggest thug shook his head. Smarter than he looked. A pity.

"Good man," I nodded. "Now get your boss out of here before anybody else has an . . . accident. Okay?"

"You won't get away with this," the goon muttered as he and his pal helped Romanik up, heading toward the door. "We'll file a complaint with the union. We'll get you all canned."

"I wouldn't do that," I said. "If we're unemployed, we'll have plenty of spare time to hunt you up. We'll make messing with you a full-time job. Tell your boss that. When he wakes up. And tell him anybody he sends nosing around my job site had best have his major medical paid up. Clear? Now take a hike."

They hiked. We finished our lunch. But our problems were just starting. Later that day, Mafe found the booze.

"I'm workin' in the basement," he explained, grinning like a kid in a candy store as we toured the miniature brewery. "I'm tracin' down power lines when all of a sudden I smell it. Whiskey. Swear to God."

"I believe you." I sighed. The four stills were in a concealed room in the back of the basement. Invisible to the eye. But not to an educated nose.

There were even a few bottles on a shelf. "Belknap's Best," Mafe read, blowing the dust off one of them. "Best what, I wonder?"

"Put it back," I said. "We'll have to turn it over to the law."

"Are you nuts? This stuff's gotta be fifty years old! Lemme have one taste, anyway." He took a deep draught, came up sputtering. "Whoa! Tastes like turpentine. But, man, what a helluva kick." He started to raise the bottle again. I snatched it out of his hands.

"One more jolt and you're fired, Mafe."

"You gotta be kiddin', Danny."

"Do I sound like I'm kiddin'? You know the rules."

"Yeah, yeah," Mafe said, wiping his mouth with the back of a greasy hand. "You're no fun anymore, Shea."

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"He never was," Puck snorted. "Boy was born forty years old. Hey, check out the setup, boys, a Michigan twist. Car radiators instead of copper line to distill the hooch. Model T Fords, looks like, from the 'twenties. Must have set all this up during Prohibition, used it right on through the war. No booze shortages at the ole Gin Mill. Who do we report this to, Danny? Eliot Ness?"

"We'll let Mrs. Belknap worry about that. Meantime, nail the door shut, Puck."

"What the hell, Danny," Mafe protested. "Don't you trust me?"

"No," I said.

"Don't take it personal, Mafe," Puck added. "He don't trust nobody else, neither."

Mafe laughed. But Puck wasn't kidding.

I'd been staying at an el cheapo motel outside Malverne, but after the hassle with Romanik and his goons, I moved a sleeping bag into the Belknap Building. Just in case.

There were plenty of bedrooms, two floors' full. But I felt most comfortable sleeping in my office on the floor. Very lightly.

Which is why I heard the truck.

Early the next morning, six A.M. or so, a vehicle pulled up out front. Snapping awake in a heartbeat, I crossed to a window with a view of the street. A pickup truck was parked at the curb, engine idling, driver eyeing the building. Checking the place out before he made a move.

I made mine first. Grabbing a chunk of two-by-four, I trotted out to the truck. Black guy at the wheel. I rapped on the side window and he rolled it down.

Café-au-lait complexion, work clothes. Calm brown eyes. "Yeah?"

"It's awful early, pal. What are you doing out here?"

"It's a public street, isn't it?"

"Sure it is, but we've had some trouble. So I'm asking. Politely. Is there something you want?"

"I'm looking for Dan Shea."

"Why?"

"That's my business."

"Mine too. I'm Shea."

"Really? You don't look much like a boss."

"I'm still Dan Shea. Want to check my driver's license?"

He smiled. A good one. Warmed his whole face. "I'm Guyton Crowell," he said, offering his hand. "I'm looking for a job. I'm a finish carpenter. Got a notebook here with some of my work in it."

He passed me the ring binder and I flipped through the photographs. Kitchen cabinets, entertainment centers, even a spiral staircase, all expertly crafted.

"You do good work," I said. "Or you fake good pictures. Did the union send you down here?"

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"Nah, I heard you were fixing up this building, thought I'd come down, see if I could help out."

"Why?"

"My granddad worked here years ago. A waiter in the old Gin Mill. Had an accident. Fell down some stairs. Lost his sight."

"Tough break."

"Could have been worse. Old Cyrus Belknap took care of him. Paid his hospital bills, put him through a trade school. Did the same for my dad, later on. Back in the day, the Belknaps hired black people when nobody else would. I figure maybe I owe them something for that. Anything else you want to know?"

"Yeah. When can you start?"

Guyton Crowell was a treasure. A master craftsman, easy to get along with. He even hit it off with Mafe Rochon. Had Mafe laughing till the tears came two minutes after they met. A rare talent. One I envied.

Crowell also found me the journeymen I needed. Two young guys fresh out of trade school. Hard workers. I told Guyton about our trouble with the union but he shrugged it off.

"This local's no help to Aframericans. But folks around Idlewild still remember what the Belknaps did for 'em during the War. You just let me know if you need any more people."

Actually, I was getting more people than I needed. Artie Cohen, the gawky *Banner* editor, came by my second-floor war room of an office a few days later, with an older black gentleman in tow. A slender man, maybe seventy, a halo of silver hair around a bald pate, granny glasses, expensive gray suit, and a Moroccan leather briefcase.

"Mr. Shea, this is Reverend James Jackson, of the First Bethel Baptist Church. We were wondering if we could see the old Gin Mill."

"It's not exactly prepped for tourists—"

"I don't mind a little dust," Jackson said quickly. "It would mean a lot to me, Mr. Shea. My mother used to work there. And Artie said you had some questions about the old days . . . ?"

I had plenty of them, but I saved them until we were actually in that strange, silent room with the moving lights from its revolving mirrored ball dappling the dance floor and the tables.

Jackson looked it over, then walked slowly to the stage, staring up at the microphone for a long time. Then he nodded. When he turned to me, his eyes were misty.

"I was here a few times, as a boy. Twelve or thirteen in those days. Rehearsal days. My mama sang with the band, Coley Barnes and his Barnstormers. Lula Mae Jackson. Went by the name Misirlou. Wonderful singer. My daddy was high church, didn't approve of Mama singing here, but she loved it so. And truth was,

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the family needed the money. I brought some pictures with me."

Opening his briefcase, he took out several old black-and-white 8x10 photographs, publicity shots for the band. "That's the Barnstormers. A big band: five reeds, four brass, piano, bass, and drums. That's Mama at the microphone." A tall, slim woman in a dated dress, old-timey hairdo. "She was beautiful," I said.

"I thought so." Jackson smiled. "The tall, thin fella next to her is Mr. Coley Barnes. Wonderful trumpet player. Sounded like a cross between Harry James and Louis Armstrong, only better. Played so fine that some folks said he'd been down to the crossroads."

"The crossroads?" I asked.

"You know the old legend. Swapped his soul to the devil in trade for his talent. Superstitious nonsense, of course, but that man surely could play a trumpet. And the way things turned out, he maybe knew the devil by his first name."

"What did happen, exactly?" I asked. "Artie said there was a robbery."

Jackson nodded. "On the Gin Mill's last Saturday night. The Barnstormers finished at two A.M. and the club emptied out. Afterward, a few folks hung around, drinkin'. Coley Barnes, my mama, some fellas from the band, old Cy Belknap. 'Course Cy wasn't old then, wasn't much more than a kid himself. Twenty, maybe. That's Cy in this picture here."

Jackson handed me a photo of the Gin Mill staff. Waiters, waitresses, black and white, all young, looking very proper in aprons, white shirts, bow ties. A lanky kid in a zoot suit stood at the rear. Glaring at the camera, hard-eyed. Trying to look older. Trying to look tough. I knew that feeling well. I passed the photo on to Artie.

"The way I heard it, Coley Barnes pulled a gun, made Cy empty the till. Pistol-whipped him, hurt him bad. Then Coley and the others took off. Took my mama with him. Nate Crowell, Guyton's grandfather, was there that night. Just a kid, but he'd been drinkin', too. When the trouble started he ran, fell down the stairs. Lost his sight. It was a terrible thing, all of it."

"And your mother? Did she come back?"

"No, she never did. Or the others, either. They stayed gone, long gone."

"Didn't the police ever—?"

"Police weren't called into it. Cy Belknap was pretty bitter about what happened. Maybe he had a right to be. Wouldn't talk about it after, not to police or anybody else. With the A-bomb dropping on Japan and the war ending, nobody worried much about a gin-mill stickup. But there were rumors . . ."

"What kind of rumors?"

"You have to understand what those times were like. A lot of local rednecks resented blacks getting wartime factory jobs. Both

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the KKK and Black Legion had chapters here. There was talk maybe Coley and the others were caught by the Klan, lynched, and buried in the pineywoods. Maybe that's why they never came back."

"Do you think that's possible?" Artie asked.

"I don't know, and it's a terrible thing not knowing the truth." Reverend Jackson sighed. "Which is worse, Mr. Shea? Thinking your mama might have been killed all those years ago? Or that she stayed gone because she cared more for her trumpet-playin' man than her own children?"

I had no answer for him. But I often thought of Reverend Jackson in the following weeks. The pain of loss in his eyes, even after all the time that had passed. It's not fair. Good memories fade away while bad ones sting forever, painful as ripping a bandage off an open wound.

But I was too busy to worry about Jackson for long. The remodeling was going well. I was sure we could meet the Christmas deadline for phase one. If we didn't get fired.

Olympia Belknap and I were checking over the condominium plans when the doorway darkened. Huge guy standing there, ancient as an oak and nearly as tall. Black suit, white shirt, a cane clutched in one gnarled fist.

"Grandfather?" Pia said, surprised. "What are you doing here? Mr. Shea, this is my husband's grandfather—"

"Cyrus Belknap," I finished for her, offering the old gentleman my hand. "I saw your picture the other day."

"Who the hell are you?" the old man asked, ignoring my hand. "Pia's new boyfriend?"

"No, sir," I said, taken aback by his hostility. "I'm—"

"Mr. Shea is the contractor I hired to renovate the building, Grandfather. I told you about him."

"And I told you to stay the hell away from this place! It's a bad place, no decent woman should be here. I want these men gone, right now! All of them!"

"Grandfather, be reasonable. I explained my plans—"

"*Your* plans? You have no right to make plans. This is *my* building, and—" He broke off suddenly, listening. "What's that noise?"

With all the construction clatter outside, I wasn't certain which one he meant.

"It's just men working, sir. We're planing down the doors to—"

He waved me to silence, cocking his head to hear the hallway racket better, his eyes flicking back and forth, anger and fear battling in them.

Fear won. He turned and stalked away without another word.

I glanced the question at Olympia.

"Bob's grandfather," she said ruefully. "He's a handful sometimes."

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Pia had shrugged off the old man's ravings, so I did, too. I shouldn't have.

A few days later I was on the phone arguing with a supplier when I got a call on my other line. Olympia Belknap.

"Something has come up, Mr. Shea," she said brusquely. "We need to talk. Can you come to my home, please?"

"Um, sure. When?"

"Now," she snapped.

Oh.

I hate those calls. Every contractor gets them, and it's never good news. Usually it means your guys have screwed something up, or your client wants to make big changes or re-haggle your price.

Sometimes it's even worse. Financing has fallen through, somebody's filed a lawsuit, your client's got cancer and wants to die in Tahiti. Bad stuff.

So far, Pia Belknap had been an ideal client. She stayed in touch, visiting the job site often, but never for long. She knew exactly what she wanted and wasn't shy about saying so. The only change she'd asked for was restoring the Gin Mill instead of converting it, which actually made our job easier.

Which was too bad. Because that meant any problem requiring an emergency meeting had to be dead serious.

I'd never been there before, but the Belknap home was familiar. It was one of the hillside beauties I'd admired from the roof of the Gin Mill—a three-story Georgian Colonial manor high on a bluff overlooking the lakeshore. Square and imposing, it had a magnificent view of the lake and town. Very handsome. Very pricey.

A maid answered my ring. Directed me to the library. I trotted up the broad staircase, taking it all in. A two-story foyer, Tiffany chandeliers, classic mix-and-match furniture, mostly leather. Elegant but homey. Old money.

Pia wasn't alone in the library. A guy in a suit was seated at a writing desk, looking over some paperwork. Mid sixties, sleek, with silver hair; his jacket probably cost more than my truck. He didn't even look up when I came in.

Cy Belknap was there, too, standing off near the fireplace, gazing out the French doors that opened onto an observation deck with a panoramic view of Malverne and the lake. His frame was shrunken, his slacks and flannel shirt hung on him like death-camp pajamas, but when the old man looked me over it wasn't a comfortable experience. His face was puckered and drawn, but his stare was hawk fierce.

"I remember you," he muttered.

"It's all right, Dad, I'll handle this," the man at the desk said, clos-

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ing the file with a flourish. "Mr. Shea, I'm R.J. Belknap, Olympia's father-in-law. I'm sorry to call you in on such short notice, but I've been away. I spend most of my time in Washington these days, serving on the President's Council of Economic Advisors."

He paused, waiting for applause, I guess. I nodded.

"I'm afraid you've stumbled into an unfortunate situation here," R.J. continued. "As an advisor, I was required to put my assets into a blind trust. I also deeded several family properties, including the Belknap Building, to my son Robert, which passed to his wife after his untimely death. This was not my intention. The Belknap Building bears our name, so naturally I want to keep it in the family."

"You've lost me," I said. "Isn't Pia a member of your family?"

"Of course, and always will be," he said smoothly. "But she's young. She may well marry again. In any case, I intend to purchase her interest in the hotel. Ergo, we won't have any further need of your services."

"Ergo?" I echoed.

"It means—"

"I know what it means, Mr. Belknap. It's Latin for 'You're getting screwed.' "

"No need to get testy, Mr. Shea. I'm willing to compensate you for your labor and expenses to date. Within reason, of course."

"No offense, Mr. Belknap, but I don't know you from Adam. My contracts are with Mrs. Olympia Belknap. Are you saying she didn't have a legal right to sign them?"

"No, of course not. She had a *legal* right, but—"

"Then hold on," I said, cutting him off and turning to Pia. "Have you changed your mind about going ahead with this?"

"No," she said firmly. "I wasn't even aware there was a problem until R.J. flew in this morning. The building isn't part of the family trust; I own it free and clear. Or I thought I did."

"The point is, Mr. Shea, the project is the focal point of a family misunderstanding," R.J. interjected, "that Pia and I need to work out with*in* the family, and there's no need for you to be caught in the middle. As I said, I'm willing to compensate you—"

"I heard what you said, Mr. Belknap. You apparently didn't hear what I said. I don't have a contract with you. Only with Pia."

"Then let me clarify things for you, Mr. Shea. I'm a presidential advisor, and as such, I have considerable political influence, especially in this part of the state. I can be a generous friend, but you don't want me as an enemy. Are we clear?"

"Yeah, I followed that."

"Good. Then let's settle this like gentlemen. I'll pay off the balance of your contract. Today. Every dime, plus a ten-percent bonus.

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You can have the check in your hand when you leave this room. Your services are no longer required."

"Whoa. You're willing to pay me off in full? Just to walk away?"

"Plus ten percent. It's a very generous offer."

"It sure is. But I don't understand. Why do you want to buy me out?"

"That needn't concern you, Mr. Shea—"

"But it does. I've got a contract with Mrs. Belknap. Since you're asking me to break it, I'd like to know why."

R.J. flushed, visibly trying to control his temper. "Very well. Since you've been working on the building, I'm sure you've heard some ugly rumors, of . . . illicit liquor sales and—"

"I've heard some stories. We've also found the stills. So?"

"They say behind every great fortune is a great crime," R.J. continued uncomfortably. "The family bootlegging business is not a story I care to have revived at this point in my career. Pia's a wealthy woman, Mr. Shea, I don't think she realizes what having real money means yet. There's certainly no need for her to become a saloonkeeper—"

"I'm not opening the Gin Mill, R.J.," Pia snapped, "I'm *re*opening it! It's already there, in perfect shape, and I'd be a fool not to make use of it. Maybe I'll even put a few bottles of Belknap's Best on the bar—"

"You snotty little bitch!" Cy spat. "You got no right—"

"Dad, stay out of this, please! Pia, you can see how upsetting this is to my father. You must understand—"

"I only understand that when Bob died, I nearly did, too. I started this project just to keep busy, but rebuilding the Gin Mill is important to me now, R.J. If having a saloonkeeper in the family embarrasses you and Cyrus, I'm sorry. At least I'll be a legal one. As for buying me out, the Belknap Building isn't for sale. Period."

"Very well, if you intend to ignore my wishes, I guess the matter rests with Mr. Shea. My offer is still on the table, sir, full price plus ten percent. What do you say?"

"Damn," I said, shaking my head. "Your offer's tempting, Mr. Belknap. The problem is, I've got a contract, and more importantly, I gave my word. The only escape clause is an act of God and since you're not Him, I guess I'm stuck."

"You'll regret this, Shea."

"Mr. Belknap, I regret it already. Now if you folks will excuse me, I have to get back to work."

"Thanks!" Pia Belknap shouted. We were in my rat-hole second-floor office later that day. I could barely hear her over the hammering and Skilsaw whine from down the hall.

"For what?"

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"Don't be coy, Shea. For standing up for me."

"Yeah, well, I'd like to play the hero but I can't. I didn't do it for you. Will your father-in-law cause trouble?"

"Probably. He's obsessed with protecting his career and reputation. Claims reopening the Gin Mill could damage his prospects in Washington."

"Maybe he's right. I don't know much about politics."

"I gathered that from the way you roughed up the union rep," she said drily. "But R.J. can bring more pressure than Romanik. Licensing boards, inspectors. He wasn't kidding when he said he's a bad man to cross."

"Then why cross him? Why are you doing this? I take it you don't need the money, right?"

"This isn't about money. My husband was a good man, too good in some ways. He handled all our financial affairs, every dime. But now I'm alone and this project is the first thing I've tried since Bob's death. If I don't see it through to the finish, I'll end up like Cyrus, just another ghost drifting around that mausoleum on the hill."

"Then we won't let that happen."

"No," she said, gathering herself, "we damned well won't. I want you to pick up the pace, Mr. Shea. Hire more men, do whatever you have to, but I want this project finished before my father-in-law finds a way to stop it."

"Yes, ma'am," I said. "Whatever you say."

But it was a lot easier said than done.

For openers, I stretched our shifts from nine hours to twelve. Nobody griped. Most of the men were bored with motel living anyway. Longer days for overtime pay? Where do we sign up?

Adding more crew was a tougher nut to crack.

Swallowing my pride, I called the union rep, Jack Romanik, and asked for his help. He told me to screw myself. Big surprise.

I found Guyton Crowell in the basement, leveling the jack posts. Told him the situation and asked if he knew any local men who might be willing to sign on.

"I can find a few. They aren't in the union, but they're good workers. All from Idlewild. Black. Any problem with that?"

"Not as long as they can swing a hammer."

"Good. I'll see to it, then. Need a favor, though."

"Name it."

"It's my grandfather. He's a cabinetmaker, did some of the finish work in that portfolio I showed you. He worked in the Gin Mill as a boy and he really wants to be a part of reopening the place. I could use his help on the kitchen remodels once we hit the second floor."

"Didn't you tell me he lost his sight?"

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"He won't be any trouble. He's worked construction his whole life, Mr. Shea. He's not a civilian. I'll look out for him."

"You'd better. Okay, we'll try it, but if there are any problems . . ."

"There won't be."

Actually, there were lots of problems, but Guyton's granddad wasn't one of them. With the extended shifts, we finished off the carpentry on the first floor a week later. It still needed carpeting and whatever customizing the tenants required, but phase one was finished, and the crews moved completely up to the second floor.

Which made my temporary office almost unworkable. Between the dust and din of construction, I couldn't hear myself think in there. Amid all this chaos, Guyton introduced his grandfather.

Nate Crowell was half of a before-and-after photo of his grandson. The "after" half. Long after. Tall, spare, stooped, and bald as a billiard, the old man had to be in his mid to late seventies. But he carried his years and his blindness well.

He shook my hand with an iron grip that could have been painful if he'd wanted it so.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Shea. My grandson tells me you're the man gonna turn back the clock on the old Mill. Hope I can be of help."

"Guyton says you're a master cabinetmaker, Mr. Crowell. Are you as good as he is?"

"Even better." The old man smiled. "The boy still gets impatient sometimes. I never do."

"What?" I yelled, as a Sawzall's chatter drowned him out.

"If you wouldn't mind," Nate continued, "I'd like to do my work upstairs in the Gin Mill. I used to wait tables in the ballroom so I know my way around pretty good up there."

"No problem, we aren't working there yet."

"Maybe you should be. Noisy as hell down here. Why ain't you usin' the main office?"

"What office?"

"In the Gin Mill. C'mon, I'll show you."

It was odd being led by a blind man, but Nate Crowell had no trouble navigating the hallway or the stairs. Using a cane to probe ahead, the old man moved only a step slower than normal and seemed to have an unerring sense about obstacles, circling around men and machinery without a misstep.

He paused on the fourth-floor landing. I thought he needed a breather. He didn't.

"This is where I ended up that last night," he said, aiming his cane at a corner. "Sixteen years old. Got a snoot full of joy juice, fell down these stairs, busted an arm and a leg, lost my sight. Damn."

"Sixteen was a little young to be drinking, wasn't it?"

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"It was closing night for the place, everybody was doin' their best to drink up the last of the stock, even me. Only I didn't have no belly for it, had a bad fall. God's punishment for a drunkard, I guess. Ain't had a taste since. C'mon."

He trotted up the final flight, stepped into the ballroom, and stopped, his face wreathed with a wide smile.

"Man, it's like comin' home," he breathed. "Even after all these years. That was my section over there, from the dance floor to the far wall. Runnin' my ass off every night from six until midnight. Mr. Cy always closed at twelve sharp, didn't want nobody to be too hung over to work in the mill the next day. His office is over there by the bandstand. See that big mirror with the table beside it?" He aimed at it with his cane. "That's Mr. Cy's table. Sit there every night, tryin' to look hard. Wasn't much more than a boy hisself in them days."

"How do you . . . remember all this? Where everything is, I mean?"

"The Gin Mill was my first job." Nate shrugged. "And except for them stairs I fell down, this ballroom was the last place I ever saw."

He showed me Cy's old office, concealed behind another nearly invisible sliding door. A perfect setup, insulated from the noise below, a desk big enough for blueprints, even a cot in the corner for catnaps. I moved my gear into it the same day.

Nate set up shop beside the dance floor, pushed four tables together to make a workbench, and began trimming out the cabinetry for the apartments below. His work was impeccable. The problem was, he kept scaring the hell out of me.

I'd find him up there working with no lights. Darkness didn't bother Nate, of course, but it startled me to step into the ink-black ballroom, switch on the lights, and—whoops! Hello, there.

Mafe Rochon was more trouble than Guyton's grandad. He's always had a problem with booze, but as long as he doesn't drink on the job I ignore his morning-after surlies. But with the longer working hours, he didn't have time to sober up entirely before work. A risky situation.

Puck warned me Mafe was sliding out of control but I was too busy with our new schedule to worry about it. Mafe was still carrying his weight, so I let it pass.

And that was a mistake.

Romanik and his two goons showed up at the site one morning, taking pictures of the crew as they arrived for work, jotting down the license-plate numbers of their vehicles. Intimidation, pure and simple.

And I wasn't in the mood.

I went storming out. Romanik saw me coming, waved his two

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buddies away, but stood his ground.

"Mr. Daniel Shea, just the man I want to see."

"You've seen me. Now take a hike."

"Don't push it, Shea, it's a public sidewalk. And I'm just here to deliver a message."

"Messenger boy is about your speed. Say it."

"You're a backwoods rube, Shea. You don't understand who's got the juice in this town. You're backing the wrong Belknap. Mr. R.J.'s offer is still on the table but the clock's running on it. You'd better take it."

"What's that to you?"

"I know construction sites, Shea. How dangerous they can be. And I'm telling you to quit now before somebody gets hurt."

"You're threatening me? You two-bit—" I was half a second from clocking him when Puck grabbed my arm.

"Don't be stupid, Danny," he whispered. "Look up the street."

He was right. A patrol car was parked half a block away, two uniforms in it. One had a camera, getting the whole scene on video. Romanik *wanted* me to deck him. In front of witnesses. The local law would bust me and Mr. R.J. Belknap could use his political juice to keep me in the slammer until I was as old as Guyton's granddad.

I was so hot I nearly punched Romanik's lights out anyway.

Didn't, though. Instead, I dusted off his lapels, waved to the camera, and walked calmly back inside. Then punched my fist through a wall. Brand new drywall, freshly painted. Which Puck made me patch all by myself as a penance for being a moron.

After I finished repairing the wall, I headed upstairs to my office to cool off. But I didn't make it that far. As I neared the fifth-floor landing, I kept hearing a strange sound. A steady thump. Not hammering. Heavier than that. I could feel it through the stairs, like a giant heartbeat. Coming from the ballroom.

Easing through the door, I froze as the full wall of sound hit me. The room was pitch black, but a big band was playing, hammering out a tune I'd never heard, drums and bass fiddle thumping in my chest like a pulse.

Couldn't see a damned thing. Fumbled for the light switch. Couldn't find it.

And somewhere in the dark a soft voice said, "Good evening, sir. Welcome to the Gin Mill. Table for one?"

My heart seized up, frozen solid as an ice block. "Nate?" I managed. "Is that you?"

"Of course, Mr. Shea. Just practicing. Maybe when the place reopens I can get my old job back, waiting tables."

"Maybe you can. Where the hell is that music coming from?"

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"The jukebox, there next to the bandstand . . . oh. Are the lights off?"

"Yeah, they are. And I can't seem to find the switch."

"Hang on a second." Nate threaded his way between the tables to the switch and the place came to life. "Sorry about that. I forget you handicapped folks need lights to get around. You don't mind about the jukebox, do you?"

"No, I—to tell you the God's truth, Nate, you scared the hell out of me. Again."

"Why? Oh, hearing the music in the dark, you mean? What did you think? Ol' Coley Barnes came back from hell to play an encore?"

"Something like that," I admitted.

"Well, that's the Barnstormers all right. Great band. Misirlou Jackson singing, Coley wailing on that trumpet. Hearin' them makes me feel like I'm sixteen again. Like somehow them times are comin' back. Maybe we should call us up a couple foxy ladies, have ourselves a dancin' party up in here."

"The way my day's going, Mr. Crowell, I'd trip over my own feet and break a leg."

"That bad, huh? Then maybe you can help me out with somethin'. When I was makin' my way to the jukebox, I found this on the stage." He placed a small, finely tooled leather case on his worktable. "Know what it is?"

"Looks like an instrument case," I said, looking it over. "Maybe for a trumpet. It's got a brass nametag on it . . . Coleman Barnes."

"Thought so. The case was beside Coley's music stand. Funny, isn't it?"

"What is?"

"Look here," he said, flipping open the latches, reversing the case to face me. "It's empty."

"Well, considering he'd just robbed the place, I expect he left in a hurry."

"Maybe. Strange, though, that he took his trumpet but not the case."

And it was.

It seemed like there were a lot of strange things about this job. One Belknap wanted it built, another wanted it stopped. Stairways were hidden in the walls and a freight elevator almost killed me. The union rep should have been glad to supply me with men; instead, he was trying to shut us down. And after fifty years, men from Idlewild were working in the Gin Mill again. Maybe Nate was right: In a strange way, history was repeating itself.

Compared to all that, an empty trumpet case shouldn't have mattered much. But it did. Somehow that empty case seemed to symbolize everything that was wrong.

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After my run-in with Romanik, I decided to keep a weather eye out for trouble, just in case. That night I set my alarm to go off every two hours. I'd wake and take a quick look around the building. Never saw anyone, but I had the definite sense of . . . a presence. Of movement. Odd noises.

Nothing I could put my finger on, just an uneasy feeling of evil lurking just around the corner. In another room. Or another time.

Dog-tired after making my rounds, I still couldn't fall back to sleep. My mind kept trying to make sense of it, to find some connection. Can bad times really come around again? All the elements were in place. Workers from Idlewild. Nate Crowell, blind now, waiting tables in the dark. *"Table for one, sir?"*

Coley Barnes and Misirlou playing in the ballroom again. With his empty trumpet case still onstage. As though he'd just stepped out. And he'd be right back.

I finally managed to nod off, but still couldn't rest. Tossing and turning, hearing Coley's big band playing onstage. Withered corpses in tattered tuxedos, playing rusty instruments, their rotting skin sloughing off. And then Misirlou stepped to the microphone . . . and *screamed!*

Sweet Jesus!

I snapped awake. My freaking alarm clock was buzzing. Time to get up, for real. Stumbling to my feet, I got dressed, feeling like I hadn't slept five consecutive minutes all night. Which wasn't far from the truth.

I made my morning rounds anyway, making sure everybody was where they were supposed to be. But they weren't. Mafe Rochon was missing.

"I don't like it," Puck said. "Maybe you'd better check on him."

"Check, hell, he's juicing again. You told me so yourself."

"Maybe, but it ain't like Mafe to miss work. And with our schedule, we need every man we got."

"Fine, I'll go check on him. But if he's tanked up, Puck, I'm gonna fire him. And then I'm gonna kick his ass around the block."

"Hell, in that case I'll come with ya." Puck grinned. "You been moody all week and Mafe's mean as a snake when he's hung over. The two of you havin' a go ought to be worth seeing."

"You don't think I can take him?"

"Damned if I know, Danny. Maybe. Maybe not."

"I don't know, either," I admitted. "But I'm in the mood to find out."

The Aztec Motel was on the low-rent end of Malverne, two dozen cheap rooms with a Burger King on one side, Slaney's Tavern on the other. Perfect spot for a gypsy construction crew. Most of the men

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shared rooms. Not Mafe. He preferred to drink alone, and nobody wanted to be in the same country with him when he woke up.

Except me. I hammered on his door. "Rochon! Wake up, dammit! Come on!" No answer. Tried again. Still nothing. Puck and I glanced at each other, worried now.

"What the hell?" Puck frowned. "If he's here, he's gotta be awake by—whoa. Somebody's moving in there. Mafe? Are you okay?"

"... help me ..."

It was barely a whisper but we both heard it. Rearing back, I kicked in the door. The stench of booze and vomit rolled over us like riot gas. Mafe was on his hands and knees by the bed, head down, drooling, panting like a dog.

"Danny?" he said, staring blankly toward us. "I can't see."

"Do you know what he drank?" the intern asked. We were at Malverne's tiny emergency hospital, a four-bed doc-in-the-box.

"This," I said, handing him the half-empty bottle of Belknap's Best I'd found on the nightstand.

"My God," he said, wincing as he sniffed the bottle. "Bad bootleg. Probably enough lead in it to poison a regiment."

"Lead?" Puck echoed.

"Sure. Good bootleggers use copper tubing, bad ones use automobile radiators. Faster, cheaper, and deadlier. Radiators are soldered together with lead. The longer they're in use, the worse the mix gets. Is your friend a heavy drinker?"

"Compared to what?"

"Oddly enough, that's in his favor. His body's built up some resistance, and he's got the constitution of a Kodiak bear. His system should purge the worst of it in thirty-six hours or so, but it was a near thing. I worked Detroit before I moved up here. I've seen men go blind and suffer permanent brain damage from bad hooch. Some even die. Your friend was lucky."

"Think so?" Puck shrugged, eyeing Mafe, still unconscious on the gurney. "He don't look so lucky to me."

"Where did he get it?" I asked. We were headed back to the Belknap in my pickup.

"Hell, Danny, he found the still, remember? Probably stashed a half-dozen bottles before he told us about it."

"This started out to be a simple job, Puck. Remodel the storefronts, convert the upper floors to condos. Should have been easy, a warm, indoor gig for the winter. But since we found that damned Gin Mill, everything's coming unglued."

"Told you that first day we should dynamite it—What the hell is all that?"

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Ahead of us, the downtown district was a sea of flashing lights, emergency vehicles, fire trucks, cops.

"It's the Belknap," I breathed. "It's on fire."

The streets were barricaded, so we ditched the pickup and ran the last two blocks to the site. Fire trucks were hosing the building down from the street side. My crew was huddled in a group behind the fire lines.

"What happened?" Puck asked, grabbing Deke LaPlaunt by the arm, leading him away from the others.

"Place blew up. Some kind of blast in the east side of the basement. Fire took off from there, tore up the elevator shaft. Hosin' it down from out here won't do nothin', Puck. It's in the walls. We tried to tell 'em, but—"

"Okay, okay," I said, cutting him off. "Was anybody hurt?"

"A couple. Guyton Crowell got cold-cocked by the blast, they hauled him off in an ambulance. Jimmy Fee got burned, but not too bad. EMTs are tapin' him up. Everybody else is okay."

"Thank God for that," I said, taking a deep breath, scanning their faces. And coming up one short. "Where's Nate?"

"Who?"

"Old Nate Crowell, Guyton's grandfather. He's been working up in the Mill."

"Jeez, I forgot all about—" But I was already running.

Vaulting the tape line, I sprinted past the firemen, ignoring their shouts. Bursting through the front doors, I charged up the stairway with Puck only a few steps behind. Deke was right. There was a lot of smoke, no flames. The fire was still contained within the elevator shaft, but as soon as it burned its way out, the old building would go up like a box of matches.

We found Nate Crowell in the Gin Mill, sitting calmly at his worktable, hands folded in his lap.

"Nate, are you okay?"

"So far, Mr. Shea." He smiled. "I smelled the smoke, wasn't quite sure what to do. Figured you or Guyton would be along presently. I was just beginning to wonder."

"No sweat, everything's under control," I lied. "We'd best use the fire escape, though. There's a lot of smoke below and we don't want to be halfway down when the fire breaks through. Let's go."

We hurried through the ballroom to the fire exit that opened onto the roof. But at the last second, Nate stopped and turned back toward the room. Not seeing it, of course, but taking it in. One last time.

And then we were through the door, onto the roof. Five stories below, a fire truck was hosing down the building. Firemen shouted at us to come down. No problem, we were on our way.

Puck helped Nate onto the cast-iron fire escape. As soon as he

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got his bearings, the old man moved right along. At the bottom we passed him off to two young firemen, who headed off around the building, yelling at us to follow. I didn't. Couldn't. I was frozen, staring up at the roof.

"What are you waiting for?" Puck shouted. "Let's go."

"That old water tank," I said, pointing upward. "It's right over the elevator shaft. If I can punch through it, it'll drown the fire."

"Don't be crazy! If the fire breaks out while you're up there you'll be trapped!"

"Dammit, Puck, we've worked too damned hard to lose this now." I didn't wait for his answer. Grabbing a fire ax off the truck, I was scrambling back up the fire escape before anyone could stop me.

Puck watched me go, cursing. Then started up after me. At the top, I halted, swallowing hard. The tarred roof around the water tank was already bubbling, puffs of smoke popping through, cooking in the flames roaring up the elevator shaft. The whole damned roof could collapse at any second.

No time to worry about that. Racing to the water tank, I was squaring off to swing as Puck clambered off the fire escape.

"Hold on, Danny," he gasped. Gray-faced, panting, he knelt, trying to catch his breath.

"Puck, I can't wait—"

"Dammit, listen to me! Don't hit it on a seam. If the rivets start popping, the tank could split open and blast us both down to the parking lot. Punch a hole in the middle of a panel, the lower down the better."

"Okay, I got it. Now get off the roof."

"Hell no! I'll croak of a heart attack if I try them stairs again. Bust it, Danny! Now! Before we burn!"

He was right, I could already feel the tar going spongy beneath my feet. Setting myself again, I took a savage swing. The ax head clanged off the tank, denting it but not breaking through. I swung again, and again, with the heat and smoke boiling up around me. But I couldn't do more than dent it.

The hell with this! Moving over a step, I squared off and swung with everything I had, slamming the axe squarely on a riveted seam.

And punched it through!

With a roar, the gout of water ripped the axe from my hands, sweeping my legs out from under me, blasting me across the roof like a cockroach headed for a drain. Tried to get up, got a mouthful of foul water instead. Then something grabbed my throat, dragging me under. Trying to twist free, I managed to get a hand on—Puck's arm.

He'd seized my collar as the flood swept me past. Clinging to the fire escape with one hand and me with the other, he was the only

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thing keeping me from being swept off the roof.

Rolling onto my hands and knees, I crawled across him, both of us clinging to the iron rail as the water roiled and swirled around us. With a shudder, a section of roof beneath the tank caved in, pulling the plug on the flood, sending thousands of gallons hurtling down the elevator shaft. Fire and flood collided in a swirling maelstrom, shaking the building like an earthquake, blasting a geyser of steam and superheated gas skyward before the crushing weight of the water prevailed, drowning the blaze in a matter of seconds.

A lifetime later, maybe a minute or two, Puck and I struggled to our feet, shaken, soaked, and damned lucky to be alive. Water was still gushing from the ten-inch gash I'd opened, but it was already losing pressure as the level of the tank dropped.

"Whoa," Puck said, taking a deep breath, "that was closer than I like 'em."

"Thanks for saving my neck."

"Hell, nobody'd miss you much. Buy me a beer sometime. C'mon, let's get below and find out what happened."

After checking the crew to make sure everybody was okay, Puck and I headed for the basement. The local chief of police, a concrete block of a cop named Brodie, was already sloshing around the elevator shaft. Most of the water had vanished down the storm drains but the basement was still awash, knee deep in filthy water.

"Not much of a mystery," Brodie said, pointing at scorch marks seared into the concrete walls. "Fire started here with a bang, then howled up the shaft like a blowtorch."

"Arson?" I asked.

He nodded. "Definitely. Recognize this?" He opened his hand, revealing a dripping wad of greyish lint.

"Guncotton," Puck grunted. "There's a pile of it stored in the old factory across the back lot. Where did you find it?"

"All over the place. The initial blast scattered it around like dandelion fuzz. Looks like somebody stacked a couple of bales of guncotton in the elevator shaft and touched it off with a blasting cap. Raw guncotton's flammable but not explosive, burns like gasoline only a lot hotter. If you boys hadn't doused it when you did, the whole block might have gone up."

Leaving Puck to scout the basement for structural damage, I made my way upstairs, checking out each floor. Despite the intensity of the blaze, there was remarkably little damage. Both fire and water had been confined to the elevator shaft, limiting the harm to that end of the building. Nothing that couldn't be fixed. Even the Gin Mill was unmarked. Timeless as ever.

The roof was a different matter. The flood had ripped huge gouges in it. The whole thing would have to be retarred. The hold-

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ing tank was only dripping now, drained to the level of the gash I'd opened. The support timbers directly beneath it were trashed: burned nearly through, then drowned. They'd all have to be replaced. A major repair job. And an expensive one. Damn.

I was taking a last look around when something caught my eye. An odd coil of metal was jammed in one of the water-tank braces. I tugged it loose. It was so twisted I didn't recognize it at first. And then I did.

It was a trumpet. Corroded by time and warped by water pressure. But a trumpet all the same.

I didn't have to ask who it belonged to. I even knew where its case was. But what the hell was a horn doing out here? Both Puck and I had examined this roof carefully before we ever took on this job. It definitely wasn't here then.

So where had it come from? I scanned the roof again, but it was only a roof, stark and barren. There were no secret doorways up here. Nowhere to hide anything.

Only one thing had changed. And I was getting a sick feeling in the pit of my stomach.

Ducking inside the Gin Mill, I grabbed a flashlight, then scrambled up the water tank to the inspection door. It was rusted shut, but I managed to yank it open, nearly tearing it off its hinges.

Inside, the tank was oddly pristine, its gleaming metal panels protected from the elements and ageing. Only a few rusting scratches near the top showed the passage of time. The bottom of the tank still held roughly three feet of water, roiled and stormy, reflecting my flashlight beam eerily on the dripping metal walls.

At first I couldn't make out anything, and when I finally saw the twisted form, I couldn't comprehend it.

Something monstrous was crouching at the bottom of the tank, the skeleton of some prehistoric beast . . . no.

It wasn't a skeleton.

It was five of them.

The bodies were tangled together in a macabre jumble, welded by silt and sixty years into a single grotesque body. One was probably Coley Barnes, one was Misirlou. The others? God only knew.

Straightening slowly on the ladder, I realized I was staring across the rooftops and the river to the mansions on the North Bank. And even at this distance I could see the rear deck of the Belknap house. And the tall man at the deck rail who was watching me through binoculars.

Old Cy. We stared at each other a long moment, across the miles and sixty years. And then I raised my arm, pointing my finger at him. It wasn't much of a gesture, but he damned well understood it.

Lowering his binoculars, he turned calmly and went into the house.

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They didn't have to tell the truth. The crime was ancient and the bodies in the tank couldn't testify against anyone.

"No, I want to settle this," R. J. said quietly. "We've carried this weight long enough. It's time to put it down." We were in his library: myself, Pia, and Malverne's chief of police, Jonas Brodie, wearing a blue dress uniform and a respectful attitude.

Old Cyrus was sitting in an armchair beside his son's desk, watching us in silence, his eyes smoldering like a banked fire.

"You're entitled to have a lawyer present, Mr. Belknap," Brodie reminded R. J.

"I *am* a lawyer," R. J. said firmly. "I'm well aware of my rights, including the right to end this interview anytime I choose. Ask your questions."

"You knew about the bodies in the tank?" Brodie prompted.

"My father told me about them years ago. That's why we kept the building empty, never tried to do anything with it."

"What happened?" Pia asked. "How did they die?"

"An accident. It was the Gin Mill's last night. After they closed, a few diehards stayed on, drinking. My dad, Coley Barnes, Misirlou, a couple of boys from the band. Even the waiter had a few."

"Nate Crowell," I put in.

"Right." He nodded. "They hadn't been drinking long when it hit them. My dad got sick, said he felt like he'd been kicked in the belly. The others were even worse off. Foaming at the mouth, vomiting, passing out. It was horrible. Dad tried to go for help but collapsed. He was unconscious for several hours. When he woke, they were dead. All of them."

"Why didn't he call the police? Or a doctor?" Brodie asked.

"To say what? That his bootleg whiskey killed five people? Go to jail for years? It was an accident."

"Prohibition was over," Brodie pointed out. "Why were they drinking bootleg whiskey?"

"That was Coley's idea," Cyrus put in quietly. "Got me a taste for bootleg, he said. Let's drink up the last of the Best, he said. Stupid black bastard."

"In any case, bootlegging was a minor offense then," R. J. continued hastily. "My father is only guilty of concealing the bodies. Granted, he used poor judgment, but he was quite sick himself at the time."

"Was he?" I asked. "Apparently he wasn't too sick to tote five bodies up that ladder."

"Stay out of this, Shea," R. J. snapped. "Chief, I admit this was an ugly business, but even if my father committed any . . . minor infractions, the statute of limitations expired on them years ago."

"You're probably right, Mr. Belknap," Brodie agreed. "Which brings us to the arson."

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"My father will admit to hiring a man named Romanik to set the fire. But since no one was hurt—"

I scratched my fingernails across the end table beside my chair, startling R.J. and Brodie. They both glared at me but I ignored them.

My eyes were locked on Cy's face as I scratched the tabletop again. He paled, swallowing hard, his hands gripping the head of his cane so tightly I thought he might snap it.

"You know that sound, don't you?" I said. "It's what frightened you so badly in my office that day."

"Look, Shea," R.J. said, "I've been patient with you, but—"

"You don't get it, do you, R.J.? Your father didn't put dead bodies in that tank. He put people in there."

"No!" Cy shouted, lurching to his feet. "They were dead! All twisted up, foaming at the mouth. Coley hanging on to that damned trumpet. But he was dead! They all were. I felt their necks!"

"So you dumped them in the tank like so much trash. They were only blacks, right? Who'd care? But at least one of them was still alive. The water must have revived him."

"That's a serious accusation, Shea," Brodie warned.

"The claw marks are still there in the tank, untouched all these years. And you heard it, didn't you, Cy? Heard someone trying to get out. Why didn't you help?"

Agony and rage battled in Cy's face, giving him a demonic look. Like a madman. For a moment I thought he was going to deny it. But R.J. was right, he'd been carrying the weight too long.

"I couldn't reach him!" Cy sobbed, his voice breaking. "It was Coley. The water woke him up but he was too far down. I ran to get a rope, but when I got back . . . he was gone. They were all gone."

"My God," Pia said softly. No one else spoke, all of us staring at the old man.

After a moment Cy looked up, meeting our eyes. "You've got to understand," he said, his voice quavering. "I'd been breaking my back for years, working days in the guncotton plant, nights in the Gin Mill, trying to get ahead. I couldn't throw it all away over a stupid mistake. I thought they were dead, dammit. It wasn't my fault. I found Nate on the stairs, took him to the hospital, made up the story about the robbery. Later on, I even helped out the families a few times. What more could I do?"

He looked at each of us in turn, as though he expected an answer. No one said a word. "God, I'm tired," he said, sagging back in his chair. "I thought telling about it would help, but . . . I just feel so tired."

"Go ahead, Mr. Belknap," Chief Brodie said. "We'll talk again later."

Rising stiffly, Cy shuffled slowly out. I didn't think he'd make it to the door. He moved like a man carrying a world of guilt on his shoulders. Or perhaps the weight of five bodies.

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When he'd gone, Pia crossed to R. J.'s desk, staring down at him like a stranger.

"You knew about this, didn't you? All this time?"

"Not all of it, but . . . yes. I knew. Believe me, Dad's paid dearly for what happened. I've had to sit up all night with him sometimes, ghosts all around him, taunting him, reducing him to a blubbering child."

"I imagine the families of those poor people had some bad nights, too."

"What could I do, Pia? Turn in my own father? I know you can't make a thing like this right, but we did what we could. Made sure the families were taken care of, paid tuition for—"

"Tuition? My God, he's a murderer! And you shielded him."

"For my family. For my son. Even for you."

"No, not for me, R. J. I never asked you for anything and I wouldn't take it now as a gift. I'm leaving. But there is one last reparation you can make. Pay off Mr. Shea and his men. I want nothing more to do with that . . . terrible place. Or with you. Ever!"

She stalked out, closing the door behind her with an icy click. The sound couldn't have been more final if she'd slammed it off its hinges.

Brodie rose as well. "I'll have to confer with the prosecutor about charges, Mr. Belknap. In the meantime, don't leave town. Keep yourself available. Clear?"

And then R. J. and I were alone. Neither of us spoke for what seemed like a very long time. Eventually R. J. pulled himself together. He asked how much it would take to settle our account and I gave him a figure. And he wrote me a check. Wages and expenses for my entire crew, including the men from Idlewild. Eight months' pay. Just like that.

R. J.'s a very wealthy man, with a magnificent home and political power.

But I wouldn't trade places with him for anything.

The bodies from the water tank—Coley Barnes, Misirlou, ar their friends—were laid properly to rest in a hillside cemete overlooking Lake Michigan, the Reverend James Jackson offici ing. He delivered a moving graveside eulogy for his long-lost m and the others. He even forgave old Cy for his part in their deat

Pia's gone home to Detroit to start her life over. The local pro cutor made some noise about charging Cy and R. J., but I do he'll push it. The evil is too old, and time is taking its vengeance anyway.

What goes around, comes around.

Old Cy has disappeared into the past completely, talking only the dead. Pleading for forgiveness. His victims are waiting for hi

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the dark side of forever, and before long he'll join them there.

If R. J. concealed his father's crime to protect his family, then seeing that family destroyed is probably punishment enough. His hopes for political office are gone, vanished in the smoke of the Gin Mill fire. He still owns most of Malverne, but the townspeople spit when they hear his name.

As for me, I came here looking for a job that would keep my crew working through the winter. And I found it. But not the one I wanted.

After R. J. paid me off for the unfinished remodeling job on the Gin Mill, he hired us again. For one final service.

We're going to do what Puck suggested that first day, dynamite the Belknap Building. Knock it down, load it into dumpsters, and haul it away.

With the fire and water damage to the roof, saving it was an iffy proposition. And anyway, it's the Belknap Building, and R. J. wants it gone. And I can't say I blame him.

But despite all that's happened, it's not a job I'll enjoy.

In foreign countries, some buildings are a thousand years old ınd more. Here in America we trash our heritage like kids stomp- ıg sandcastles.

Don't get me wrong, I'm a builder. And proud of it. I like con- uction sites, the whine of power saws, the slam of nail guns. ɜ fresh, clean scent of pine lumber. I love seeing new buildings straight and true, knowing I had a hand in creating them.

ıt I'll be sorry to see the old Gin Mill fall.

ɜre was something special about that place. Everybody felt it. e because so much happened there. Good times, bad times. and passion and violence. And death.

ilding like the Gin Mill is more than cement blocks and dry- ɾer time, the lives it shelters become as much a part of it as bricks. When we destroy it, we lose more than a structure. ɔur last contact with the ghosts and memories that linger

ıd ry ıt- ɔm ns. ıse- ubt ɔwn

ts might laugh, but anybody with feelings knows what ɾ about.

ildings have souls. Characters so strong you can actu- m. Like the Gin Mill.

t when I first stepped into that empty, light-dappled

t sigh.

it was just the wind. Or an air vent opening. But I Not anymore.

n Mill stood silent and empty all those years.

with m on

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PASSPORT TO CRIME

THERE ARE NO POCKETS IN OUR GRAVECLOTHES

by Bertil Falk

Translated from the Swedish by the author.

It was an incredibly hot summer in Sweden. The meteorological institute reported that for a couple of days the night temperature in Stockholm had been tropical. It had not fallen below sixty-eight degrees, which is very rare.

I spent my summer on a small island in the archipelago. I sat in the shade sipping at my lukewarm coffee, for I had learned during my years in Kenya that in hot weather cold drinks make things worse. My neighbour, whom I thought of as a "young lady," spent her days painting landscapes. Every weekend her husband, who worked in the capital, came to join her, on board the regular skerry cruiser. They rented a typical small "Falu red" cottage with white-painted trim. So did I, as well as many other summer visitors. In their garden and against the heavenly backdrop of blue skies and the yellow sun, the yellow cross on blue ground fluttered in the wind from a white flagpole with a golden boss at the top.

Bertil Falk is a retired Swedish newspaper and TV journalist who spent ten years on assignments in Britain, India, and the U. S. His fluency in English has allowed him not only to do many translations of English novels and stories into Swedish, but to sometimes try it the other way around, as with his own story here. Mr. Falk is the author of fourteen mystery and science fiction novels published in Sweden and the producer of numerous TV documentaries, some of which have been shown in the U. S.

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She was about twenty-five years old and during the week she used to seek the company of the retired missionary who was her neighbour—me, that is. One evening, after she had complained about the difficulty of painting in the heat, she told me that she had just read a strange true story about a case that had taken place about seventy years ago in Gothenburg. A jealous young man had killed his girlfriend in a barn. A simple case of murder? Yes, but the odd thing about it was the aftermath. Some days after the funeral, the police found a dead woman's body in the home of a mentally deranged man. To his astonishment, the pathologist recognized it as the body of the murdered girl he had performed an autopsy on the week before. It turned out that the deranged man had stolen the corpse on the evening of the day it had been buried. He simply lifted it from the grave, which had been left open till the next day.

"Is that really possible?" she asked me.

She looked so young and so fresh. She reminded me of a girl I had been in love with half a century ago, similar blue eyes, fair hair, an attractive smile.

"I remember that story," I said. "What would be impossible about it?"

"Do they keep graves open overnight after an interment?"

"Why not?"

"In the night, people could fall into an open grave."

"Most people don't run about in graveyards in the night. And it has happened that drunken people have fallen into graves in broad daylight. But yes, sometimes the gravedigger waits till the next day before he covers a grave. Once it happened to me."

She looked at me, somewhat surprised. "You've been a gravedigger?"

"Certainly not." And I told her the story.

It happened about ten years ago. Evert Svensson was an old friend of mine. For many years he worked as a mining engineer in a South African diamond mine before finally returning to Sweden. His wife Laura was the daughter of a Social-Democratic municipal commissioner, a very good-looking woman. She successfully devoted her time to inducing young women to use cosmetics and to turning her own children into good consumers of the unneeded things that a greedy industry portions out in a never-ceasing stream. She was a very warm and pleasant person, and she had a bizarre sense of humour. The Svenssons had a son and a daughter. The son, Lars, was a computer scientist, married to Ulrika, who was a surgeon. They lived—or as they would say, "resided"—near Evert and Laura. The daughter, Lena, was a housewife and married to a plumber by the name of Sven. They lived a long way off.

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Evert and I used to meet quite often for a couple of whisky tumblers at his place. Or rather: Evert took his Bowmore and soda, while I, as the teetotaller I always have been, had my Ramlösa water. He would talk about his time as a mining engineer. Once he even showed me an uncut diamond about the size of a walnut. In my opinion it was not much to look at, but he said that it was worth a fortune.

When Evert died and Laura became an ageing widow, she now and then invited me for a dinner in their mansion with its view of the sea. Her relationship with her children was not the best. She used to complain that they wished to see her dead so they could lay their hands on the fortune she had at her disposal, for as long as she lived, she retained undivided possession of the estate.

Her health eventually gave way, and one day she asked me to come over and see her. I had no idea then that she was dying. On the porch, she sat in a deck chair in a semi-recumbent position. It was a sunny afternoon in August. I saw that she had fallen away since the last time I had seen her. But her eyes had their usual acuity.

"I've not long left," she said. "Soon the brats will have their way. Unfortunately, there are no pockets in the cerements, so I can't bring anything with me to the other side. Or do you think I could? As a staunch Christian, you should know."

I was puzzled. I did not get what she was driving at, and she was not kidding. She was calm, her voice weak but firm.

"What are you talking about?"

"This," she said. "Look here."

She handed me a small case.

"Open it!"

There on a bed of dark blue velvet was that uncut diamond that Evert had shown me many years ago.

"Do you know what this is?" Laura asked.

"A piece of uncut coal that is worth a fortune," I answered with the words Evert had once used, and I returned the case to her.

"I don't want the brats to get it," she said. "They don't deserve it. I want to give it to you. Evert always enjoyed those afternoons and evenings together with you. And he once told me that he would like to give it to you. So I've made up my mind."

I shook my head. "I don't want it. I don't need it. Give it to your children."

"Don't worry about them. They'll get more than they deserve," Laura tried to persuade me.

"I'm not fond of these kinds of things," I said.

"You can give it to charity," she said.

"No. These things have a tendency to bring ill fortune. You give it to charity."

"It's too late. I'm dying."

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"Oh, come on, Laura."

We were interrupted by her home help. She came to serve us coffee. With some water Laura swallowed some pills that her doctor had prescribed. Understanding that this was our last conversation and feeling the atmosphere turn solemn, I bid her goodbye, bent forward, and kissed her forehead. It was feverish and cold at the same time. When I left her, she sat there with the case in her hands. There was a bewildering smile on her lips. I had never before seen her smiling that way.

Three days later, Laura died. She still lay dead in the living room when I came over to express my sympathy. Sorrow and distress were not exactly palpable. Instead a quarrel over property was in full swing.

The brother and sister and his wife and her husband could not agree on who would have the bisected antique mirror or the Gustavian rococo furniture. And above all, they were excited about the uncut diamond:

"On Sunday morning she was there in her bed stuffing herself with those damned pills her doctor prescribed. She did not trust me to attend, of course. It had to be some other doctor. Her daughter-in-law was not good enough. She bluntly told us that she had disposed of the diamond, and then she died. Just like that. We've looked everywhere and can't find it."

It was Ulrika, her tongue as sharp and her voice as piercing as the tools she used in her profession.

"It was in a case," I said.

"It's empty now," Lars explained.

The small case was indeed empty. A small depression in the velvet indicated where the diamond had been all those years.

"I wonder where she hid it," Ulrika said.

At the funeral a week later, the diamond was still missing. I understood from the line of reasoning they followed, which was as far removed from mourning as imaginable, that the house had been meticulously searched. The home help had been the target of insinuations. She was red with weeping.

"Perhaps you have some notion of where the diamond could be?" Lars said to me.

I had no idea, and even if I had had one, I did not feel like assisting them in finding a fortune that I knew the deceased had grudged her heirs.

"Laura said that she disposed of it," I said to Ulrika. "So why do you suspect the home help?"

Ulrika looked intently at me with her big brown surgeon-eyes, as if she reflected on performing a kind of live autopsy on me.

"For the simple reason that the home help could have helped

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Laura to hide the diamond," she said. "Haven't you any idea where it can be?"

"Well, if I had been Laura, I would have thrown it into the sea," I said, suppressing my anger.

"We've thought of that," Lars countered. "But it's a hundred and fifty yards to the sea and she could not possibly have been near the shore the last weeks of her life, certainly not in her last days. We were here most of the time, and she told us she had only just got rid of it. We were by her side as she swallowed her pills with her glass of water, but she refused to eat anything. And for your information, I don't think she had any opportunity to give the diamond to the home help as Ulrika thinks."

He looked reproachfully at his wife.

The funeral service was sparsely attended. The usual psalms were sung. "Earth to earth," the minister said. The home help wept a little. "Ashes to ashes," the minister continued. Lars puckered his brows. "Dust to dust." The coffin was carried out and lowered into the prepared grave. The next day it would be covered by the gravedigger. My eyes moved from one face to another as we stood gathered there around the pit in the ground. At the request of the deceased, there were no flowers and no wreaths. Laura hated cut flowers. Her opinion about this was crystal clear: "It's enough that I fade away. No flower shall fade on my coffin lid."

The home help's face was red and swollen. Lars looked in a pondering way at his mother's coffin, which now touched the bottom of the grave. Ulrika, who had looked serious, suddenly seemed to have thought better of it. Her face lit up, and for a moment a smile of—was it triumph?—was on her lips. It lasted for a second and then she looked serious again. Lena, the daughter, bit with her upper row of teeth at her bloodless lower lip. Sven, her husband, nervously fingered his left lapel with his right hand.

"Well, let's go back and continue the search," Lars said.

"Is there any sense in searching?" Sven wondered.

"Hardly," Ulrika said. "Lars and I will go home."

"I don't know," Lars said, but stopped speaking as Ulrika caught him with her sharp eyes.

Lena shook her head. "We decided not to have any funeral feast," she said, her voice tired and flat, "so that Sven and I could go on searching."

She turned to me. "How about you?" she asked.

"None of my business."

But I was not sincere when I said that.

The glimpse I had had of the momentary expression on Ulrika's face bothered me.

"I think that you should come with me and Lars," Ulrika said to

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Lena and Sven. I saw them driving away in their cars, Lars and Ulrika in a flashy Volvo, Lena and Sven in an even flashier Chevrolet of a vintage kind. I myself sat in my cheap Skoda Felicia and pondered.

Later that evening, I tried to read but I could not concentrate on the speeches of Cicero. I still pondered as the wall clock in my library struck eleven o'clock. It was then that the pieces fell into their proper places. I shook my head in despair and called my friend Roland Franzen, the police superintendent. I told him about my conversation with Laura a few days before she died. And I told him my theory.

"I think she took the opportunity to swallow the diamond when she took her pills," I said. "She could have done it under the very noses of her heirs. Maybe she got the idea when she told me that there are no pockets in the graveclothes. I suspect that her daughter-in-law guessed the truth. And she is a surgeon. And the grave is open till tomorrow."

Roland listened to me and I fairly saw him nodding on the other end of the line. I picked him up in my Skoda. The church clock hit the midnight mark as we arrived. The grave was open. I shone my torch. The lid was on the coffin, but it was unscrewed. Roland leaped down and took it off. The coffin was empty.

"They will either get rid of the corpse or they will return it to the grave," I said.

"We'll take no chances," Roland decided, and sent for reinforcement.

The perpetrators' cars were parked outside the house of Lars and Ulrika. The door was unlocked. We did not ring the bell but walked straight in. We stopped in silence in the doorway of the dining room. There, on the oblong dining table, was the naked body of Laura. Her daughter-in-law Ulrika leaned over the corpse. We saw how she brought up something from the insides of her mother-in-law, while Lars, Lena, and Sven stood gathered stock-still around the body. In her hand Ulrika held a small capsule. She opened it and unfolded a paper.

"Damn it," the surgeon said. "She has cheated us."

Ulrika gave the paper to Lena. She read aloud: "That's what you get, body-snatchers and desecrators of corpses!"

At that moment Roland intervened.

"Enough is enough," he said.

The four of them turned their surprised and horrified faces towards the door where Roland and I stood.

My neighbour had hung upon my words as I told her the story. Now she thoughtfully looked out over the narrow strait that sepa-

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rated our island from another small rocky islet.

"I guess they had to pay a price for their outrage?" she said.

"Not very much," I told her. "Ulrika was sentenced to three months' imprisonment for desecration of a grave and disturbing the funeral peace. The others got off with no more than a fright and a fine. According to the statute book, they could all have been given six months. The court obviously considered Laura to have provoked the crime, and they may therefore have found the circumstances somewhat extenuating. I don't know. I wasn't there."

"And that's the end of the story?"

"Not at all. You see, the week after this ghastly occurrence took place, I, as usual, went for my evening stroll. I put on the jacket I wore the last time I visited Laura and I walked down to the shore. I sat down on a mole, contemplating. It was windy with scudding clouds. The sea ran high and the waves dashed in and flooded the shore over and over again. There were drops of rain and I regretted that I had not put on my rain suit and sou'wester. I was on the verge of returning home when I put my hand in the pocket of my jacket and felt something."

"Of course! Laura had slipped the diamond into your pocket when you kissed her feverish forehead," my neighbour whispered.

"That's right."

"Don't tell me that you have the diamond here and will show it to me."

I smiled at her. "You see, I stood there and I looked at the seagulls. They felt, as I did, the storm brewing. I walked out on the pier, and summoning all my strength I threw that calamitous thing worth a fortune as far away as I could into the sea."

"Calamitous?"

"Yes, jewels such as Kohinoor and the Hope are not calamitous in themselves. But our greed makes them so.

"Anyhow, Laura had a strange sense of humour and she proved it with the last thing she did. She was right in what she said, too: There are no pockets in our graveclothes." ●

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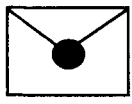

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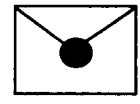

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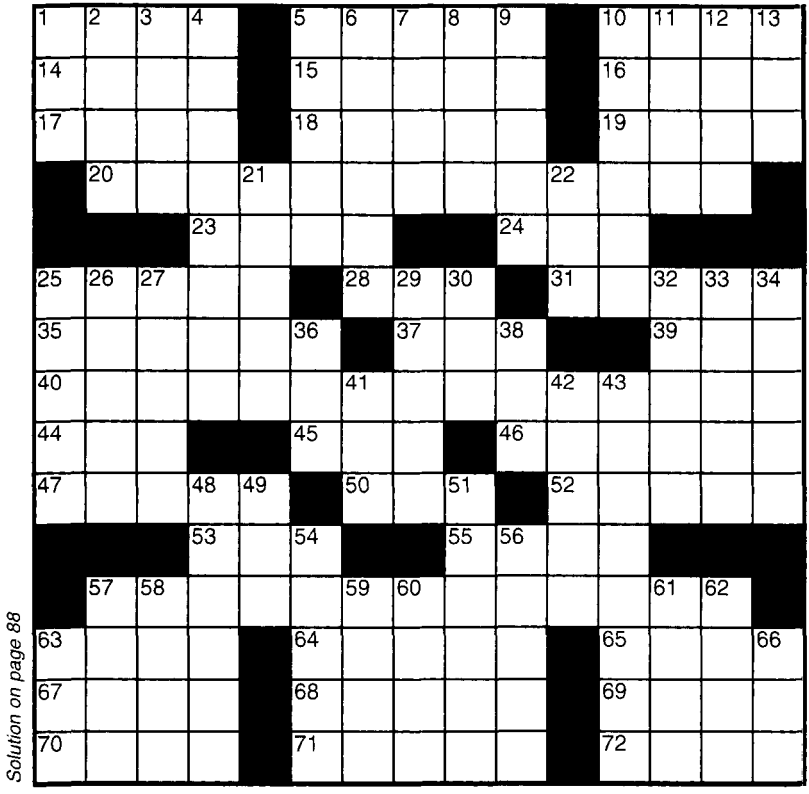
THE MYSTERY CROSSWORD

Me and My . . .

by Ruth Minary



Solution on page 88

ACROSS

1. *Born Free* lion
5. Don't stand there, have _____.
10. Caleb who wrote *The Alienist*
14. Harvest
15. Macduff, for one
16. Flu symptom
17. Follows last
18. Throng
19. Beryl, 1966 Tony winner for *The Killing of Sister George*
20. Beneath the apple tree?
23. Irritate
24. Indian title
25. Tag at the end of a shoelace

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28. They used to spin LPs
31. Wanderer
35. Soak
37. Drivers org.
39. Ike's command
40. Tailing me?
44. Author Deighton
45. Robert van Gulik's "Judge"
46. Follows control and jury
47. Record
50. Richmond was its cap.
52. Trite
53. Spanish article
55. Cloy
57. And sometimes running?
63. Dorothy Sayers's "Tailors"
64. Jack, in *The Kennel Murder Case* (1933)
65. Latin verb
67. West German river
68. *The Phantom of the* _____
69. *The Nun's* _____, Candace M. Robb
70. Moist
71. Made a dress
72. Responsible for "Perry"

DOWN

1. Unit of work
2. Meadows
3. Belt
4. Evident
5. Massachusetts industrial city
6. Exhibited
7. See 62 Down
8. "_____ on the opposite shore will be," Longfellow, "Paul Revere's Ride"
9. First year college students, as a rule
10. Precedes graph and gram
11. James, author of *A Death in the Family*
12. *Murder Can* _____ *Your Looks,* Selma Eichler
13. Dashiell Hammett's _____ *Harvest*
21. Abandon
22. Aquatic bird
25. Confuse
26. Anna Katherine _____, first successful American woman mystery writer (1878)
27. Inclined
29. P. D. _____
30. Voice
32. Mythical murderess
33. Coral reef
34. Search for underground water
36. Concealed
38. Dun-it to Cleopatra
41. Dry wine
42. _____ la vista
43. Precede in time
48. Frederic and Manfred
49. Former enemy of the U.S.A.
51. Convince
54. Storage structures
56. In the lead
57. Thick
58. Once more
59. Scruff
60. Raised
61. "The Tentmaker"
62. At times, may have 7 Down?
63. Actor Beatty in *Radioland Murders* (1994)
66. _____ *No Evil,* Eleanor Taylor Bland

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Art by M. K. Perker

SKIPPY

by Derek Nikitas

It's cold enough to burn. It'll scream against metal. Never, ever let the children touch. Careful! Watch them! Kids will try snatching those milky ice pebbles from the cooler where the ice cream is stacked frozen, the cooler secured in the pickup bed just behind the tailgate that's all stickered with Blue Bunny varieties. Some kids will ride the fender; they'll grab Creamsicles and that perilous dry ice will rain down on the summer pavement and their tender flesh.

Your average commission will be a hundred a day, under the table. Headquarters is three miles west of Hammersport on a back road lined with empty cabbage fields. It's also the home of your employer, Gregor Havel—a singlewide trailer propped by cinder blocks on a treeless acre. Each morning at nine sharp you'll arrive to find three Mazda trucks in the gravel drive with their white-washed wooden truck caps needing a fresh coat of paint. The words *Prince Ice Cream* will be fading away. Gregor will emerge from his tin-roofed porch, squinting at the daylight, scrawny in his hide rough and gray as an elephant's. He'll slouch in a haze of cigarette

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smoke. Out here the crickets will screech incessantly.

On your first day, ask if this is "Skippy central."

Gregor will answer in a gruff Dracula accent—Romania or Hungary or something, you'll guess. "What is this name 'Skippy'?" he'll say, coughing.

One morning deep into July when the sun burns dew from the grass and cicadas drone, you'll arrive at Gregor's to find flimsy cardboard boxes dumped across the gravel, wrappers torn and skittering in the breeze, bright popsicle puddles seeping into the lawn. One cooler overturned and splashed with the gray sludge of a hundred thawed desserts. Gregor will stand above it, unshaven, pistol in hand as if primed to blast a dying fudge-pop from its misery.

"Go home!" he will demand. He will turn toward the fields to speak. "They come at night to steal and vandalize—three times already this summer. I remain awake as long as possible, but still I miss."

Ask him who did this.

"I will catch them. But go home now—there is nothing to sell today. I will murder them many times in the face." He'll rattle the pistol as if it's bucking in his grip. "Bang, bang, bang! Yes?"

Don't let the children come to harm. Bellow, "Stop!" from your window before they rush into the street. Shift to park, leap from the cab with your change dispenser jangling like a tambourine from your belt. Around to the tailgate, position yourself street-side with every sense attuned to traffic and children—even as orders are placed, even as prices tally in your mind—Banana Fudge Bomb Pop $1, Mississippi Mud $1.50, Strawberry Éclair $1, Sponge Bob $1.75. Never let the children jaunt blindly away from a purchase, oblivious to passing cars. Grab them if you must, but only as a last resort.

Be warned; at first your sleep will be plagued by the mental echoes of the bell you clang. Two weeks of training with Gregor, stopping hourly at gas stations for coffee and All Sport, more Marlboros. He'll flick his cigarettes into an ash pile on the floor-

When he is not at work on his own stories, Derek Nikitas teaches creative writing at the State University of New York at Brockport. His work has appeared twice in the *Ontario Review*, and when we last heard from him he had had a story accepted by *Chelsea*. Mr. Nikitas's first fiction for *EQMM* is also his debut crime story, though in 2001 he won the Elizabeth K. Daniels Mystery Writing Contest. †

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board beside the gearshift. A farm bell will be attached just above a hole drilled into the cab roof, through which a leather shoelace dangles, tied overhead to the bell yoke. Pull the strap, and the clapper knolls the bell.

"Not like that," Gregor will say; he'll pluck the strap from your fingers. "You sound like a funeral dirge. Make happy sounds like so—" His own fingers will flick, and the bell will tinkle sweet and cool. "Don't ring without thinking. Rhythm, then silence—like suspense. Wait, ring here where the houses make echo, you see?"

Stand with Gregor behind the truck with the exhaust pipe puttering heat at your shins. In six days of work you'll have tanned six shades darker. Your legs will pulse with awakened muscles while Gregor scrutinizes your latest sale, his wiry eyebrows drooping. "You take their money like a beggar—snatch, snatch. No subtlety. The money is not the objective, it is the afterthought. Make them believe this. Take the money as if you are refusing the money, like so. Understand? They are sheep—the people—all of them sheep. You tell them what to buy. Not with words; with your body. Use your shoulder to hide pictures of the cheap ice cream. Cheap Creamsicles. Forget Creamsicles. Your fingers swipe across the stickers and lead their eyes toward expensive items, see?"

Gregor will point toward an elderly woman across the street brushing pine needles from her driveway with a broom—even as dozens more needles dive onto the blacktop behind her. "Do you see her? All the time they do these things with no meaning," Gregor will explain. "They thrash around in little plastic pools. They eat swine carcasses outside with buzzing flies. They drag children around on leashes—I have seen it. They sneak through the cornfields at night to pillage my coolers, like animals."

Keep the larger bills buried in a sack beneath the driver's seat. Drive with both hands on the wheel and never let your mind drift, even late at night when you're exhausted from twelve hours' work and your high beams light the black knotty trees encroaching on the road, even when silhouettes seem to lurch from the woods toward your open window and you want nothing but to drift off to sleep.

Watch for deer eyes gleaming. Realize this is the hardest you've ever worked. Some mornings you'll pray for a rainstorm cancellation, but hours later under starlight and after a full shift you'll smell like soil and breathe like wind; you'll have traversed a stretch of Earth and conquered its native peoples.

Gregor will wait on his porch, slumped at a picnic table forking spinach from a can into his mouth, his cigarette butts piled in an aluminum ashtray. Overhead a bug zapper will glow purple and sizzle with tiny deaths. Seated at the table, separate bills by

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denomination and stuff your coins into paper rolls. Collect pennies in soup bowls. Gregor will estimate your earnings on sight. On poor days his anger will mount like an instant heatwave.

"You have lost your customers, see? This money is crap. They run away and never return. What can I do now that you have failed?" A mosquito will pierce his upper lip, but you will say nothing as it gorges. "I take two weeks training for you but still you understand nothing!"

Nights when the money piles higher, he'll grin from one corner of his mouth and help count the profits. He'll talk and reveal that thirty years ago he became a refugee from Communist Czechoslovakia, a student revolutionary of the Prague Spring just before Russian tanks rolled into Wenceslas Square and battered the human face of socialism. "Our First Secretary Dubček, they kidnapped him to Moscow and broke him, understand? They tied their ropes to him and made him their Communist puppet. The people of Czechoslovakia—they bow to Hitler, they bow to Stalin, they bow to everything because they have no spine to hold them up. So I take my spine and leave."

Gregor will keep the pistol on the bench beside him. When he hears rustling outside the porch windows he'll grab his weapon and burst through the screen door. The screen will snap behind him like a mousetrap.

Some days the streets will teem with kids scrambling and scrounging through pockets and sneakers for sweaty wads of money, a loose quarter. They'll grow frantic as your Prince Ice Cream truck putters into view. Kids will pogo on the roadside, flapping money like parade pennants.

Preserve the illusion that Prince Ice Cream is sweet nostalgia, a summer amusement staffed by honors students with hearts like Saint Nick. But understand that it doesn't last. Soon your truck will crawl along abandoned streets; the clatter of your bell will ricochet off silent houses. Someone out of sight will yell, "Skippy is a ripoff." A Sno-Kone will blast against your windshield, a Sno-Kone you sold on that street the day before. It will melt on the glass like a disintegrating rainbow.

Become desperate. Search everywhere within the hundred square miles of your jurisdiction, especially near sundown when sales peak and you're prowling the woods west of Hammersport, just south of the lake. One virgin cul-de-sac can sometimes yield more cash than several village streets. Learn to ignore NO TRESPASSING and NO SOLICITING. Follow roads that become private drives. Encounter a farmer who'll jump from his tractor and buy an entire box of Mississippi Mud Pies.

When it's worst, remember there will always be certain apart-

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ment complexes and trailer parks—the places you'll haunt even after nightfall and into late September, places where people squint at your headlights from their lawn chairs unfolded in the parking lot. Children in their pajamas and with dinner still smeared on their cheeks; children pouring sticky dimes into your hands even before their selections are made. "What can I get for this much?" they'll ask. Watch them devour whole popsicles in the red glow of the taillights. Some kids without money will beg while their parents gawk from concrete steps. These children will cling to your arms and implore you.

Shirtless, bald-shaven teenage boys will wander around your truck, whispering to each other, lingering beside the driver's door where inside the money is hidden, where the key in the ignition keeps the truck running. Your shoulders will tense, your pupils widen, but you'll know you couldn't prevent them if they tried.

One evening in the woods just south of Lake Ontario your headlights will flash over a sign half obscured by overgrown roadside brush—a wooden marker for Dorset Motor Park. Brake, and notice for the first time that the dirt access road leading to the abandoned Whitman Cold-Storage Plant is bordered by a huddle of mobile homes.

In Dorset Motor Park you'll lurch the truck through an unseen pothole, and the bell will sound its tocsin even before you pull the strap, a noise intruding through private windows and thin trailer walls. Those who are already outside will gather in the street, children first, stepping into the high beams with their faces stark as bleached bone. Beyond them, at the road's end, the factory will rise with its crumbling brick and lettering faded to charcoal dust.

A single street that had seemed deserted will now rustle with shadows moving just beyond the light. Someone will lean into your open window, a man whose wet coils of hair stream across half his face. Notice fresh blood on his swollen lower lip. Smell the doughy odor of beer.

"We been waiting all summer for you, man," he'll say. "Frigging kids been pestering me." He'll reach across your body and flick one clean peal from the strap. Catch the onion scent of his armpit. He'll unlatch your door and step backward to where others are crowding, all of them scowling like prison inmates. The only lights in the park will be those glowing from the trailer windows, dimmed by towels and sheets used for drapery.

A dozen silent children will huddle at the tailgate. Stand behind them. Swat the gnats hovering around your head and glance back to the paved road that you've left. Overhead, stripped tree branches will vein the skyline.

The man with the busted lip will press through the children,

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wielding a beer can in a Buffalo Sabers cozy. "All right—it's on me, twerps—but you all get Bomb Pops." Nodding to you, he'll flip open the cooler lid. "They just help theirselves here or what?"

Push through the children, quietly excusing yourself. Some kids will mutter about the baseball mitt with the embedded gumball, but the man will hold firm—"It's Bomb Pops or nothing. Skippy'll set you up." Wince at the contempt fizzling in that name—Skippy. Stand on the fender. Dole out Bomb Pops to children clutching, some of them shivering.

"What's the damage, Skip?" he'll ask, slurping his beer. He'll lift one leg and scratch at a welt on his bare foot and groan. He'll be wearing only a pair of cutoff jeans with white threads like peeling skin.

Tell him fifteen dollars.

"Fifteen? You're kidding me, man."

Crouch to retrieve the sticky Popsicle wrappers the children have littered. Sense that almost everyone around you is shifting, pacing, pulsing with a communal anxiety as if they've all just been aroused from a year-long sleep.

"You take checks, Skippy?"

Say no. Someone behind you will chuckle.

The man with the bloody lip will thrust his hands into his pockets and turn them inside out, revealing nothing. He'll bow slightly, as if some magic has been performed. Children will have knelt their bare knees on the dirt road behind your truck, slurping at their popsicles as melting streams drip across their knuckles like candle wax.

Tell him that you can't leave without the money.

"Looks like you'll need to, Skip. Hey—next time you come around I'll have it for you, Scout's honor."

You will have already decided that no rubber-banded wad of fives and tens is worth offering yourself to those who want nothing less than to beg and steal and tear you open. Think of Czechs bowing their babushkas to the Russian tanks. Notice that every one of several dozen windows at the cold-storage plant has been shattered, and within them is the blackest form of darkness. Feel a raindrop on your brainstem. Mumble a curse.

"What? What'd you just call me?" the man will ask. His beer will splash your T-shirt and his hands grapple your face, thumbs gouging for your eyes. His fingers will stab into your mouth with the taste of oil and dirt. You'll be pummeled by his wet flesh and your knees will betray you; they'll drop into the pebbly mud. He'll groan something wordless as you curl inward, wrapping all of your mind into the blind and silent cocoon you have made.

But you won't succeed at wishing yourself away from there, no matter how you clench your eyes. Nothing will subdue a sudden

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impact whiplashing your skull backwards against your own rubber tire. Hear pain screech inside your ears and feel it sear through your cheek and lash within your sinuses. Believe the world itself has slammed to a halt. Then realize that the man with the busted lip has kicked you barefoot in the jaw.

Open your eyes and dark images will fade into white. Watch your blurred assailant crumple onto a cinderblock pile, clutching his own foot, bawling that it is broken. The children will leer at you both. They will shove Bomb Pops like shotgun barrels between their own pursed lips.

For God's sake keep conscious. Escape through a bleary smog of pain and tinnitus by pattering your hands along the truck until you reach the driver's door. Hunch into the cab. Grind the gearshift into reverse and lay all your strength on the horn. Watch the children scatter in the rearview. Bleed. Bleed on your own fingers and your neck and your clothes. Bleed starburst droplets onto your lap and the vinyl seat cushion. Ball a yellow napkin from the trash of your Wendy's value meal and press it into the gash opening the flesh of your cheek; feel it soak as you lunge the truck backwards through divots. Listen to the bell clang and the cooler door slamming like a mute mouth in rage.

Into your headlights a woman will rush, lofting a fan of dollar bills, her head shaved except for a few cornsilk strands. She'll stumble toward your truck with her loose cellulite all tremors. She'll clomp sandals through mud and soil, the hem of the T-shirt dangling below her knees. Even as her mouth wrenches, you won't stop.

Instead, stop later at a defunct gas station three miles away, at the northern outskirts of Hammersport. Park beside a lone telephone booth where the glass will be scratched with a hundred initials, all of them glittering in a street-lamp shine. Let the truck idle while you slump in the driver's seat and plan a phone call to police, or an ambulance, or Gregor. Dispense one quarter into your palm. Taste the metallic tinge of shock spreading across your tongue, prickling down through your lungs, the flavor of consciousness giving way again.

Sleep.

Awake some time later when a downpour is growling on the windshield. Find yourself draped across the passenger seat. The napkin will have become a red pulp dried against your wound. Forty minutes will have passed, and rain will have pooled in the eroded concrete around the telephone booth. You should call the police. You should let hospital nurses stitch your wound and administer tetanus shots and speculate that your face had been sliced open by your assailant's sharp toenails.

But you won't—you won't call anyone, will you?

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You'll think of Gregor slurping spinach and awaiting your late return, maybe already back in his truck scouring these backwoods for signs of a wreck. You'll think he has decided that you've been swallowed up by the world, and you'll be desperate to show him your mangled face, prove to him your resolve.

But don't go back to Gregor. Go home. Don't force the truck through a pummeling rain that will drench the Hammersport streets into smeared impressions of themselves. Stoplights dripping crimson, street signs melting. Don't drive so quickly that the moist road hisses underneath your tires. Stall; stop for gas. Don't barrel across the farm roads stretching toward Gregor's trailer.

Because what you'll find when you return is Gregor prowling outside sopped and shirtless in the purple sheen of his bug zapper, wearing nothing but his khaki shorts, hair slicked over his cranium. He will be aiming his pistol with one hand toward the grass, stiff-armed. He'll cup a cigarette dry with the other.

If you come this far, then just keep driving. Steer erratically if you must, but drive past. Abandon the truck down the road and race on foot across black and waterlogged fields until you collapse, almost drowned and heaving.

But don't stop at Gregor's trailer. Don't wedge the truck headfirst into its gravel dock. Don't douse the headlights as Gregor lurches toward you round-shouldered and puffing smoke like a dying campfire. With frantic forearm gestures he will lure you from the truck. "Come see what I have locked away. Hurry," he'll say.

The rain will patter your shoulders. You'll forget the money pouch and the generator plug and everything if you follow Gregor's trail. He'll sidestep toward his trailer, never losing sight of you, urging you onward with flicks from his pistol. He will approach one of the three decommissioned coolers rusting in his yard. He'll crush his cigarette against the cooler lid, where the rain will have gathered dust into rivulets of gray. When he opens the cooler, he'll wrap his finger around the pistol trigger and stab the weapon inside.

You'll see a boy just barely teenaged soaked in his jeans and a black T-shirt. A kid wearing fear on his face like the dead wrenching rubber on a Halloween mask. Blood in one nostril bubbling with each harried breath. Don't allow yourself to see his eyes wet and blinking, his body folded inside the cooler with limbs bent useless.

"I caught the little insect, yes?" Gregor will say.

Don't arrive at this moment. Don't. Take another route. Because when the rain drives pain back into your wound and reminds you of your own shameful contortions, you will not be able to withhold. You'll rush back to your truck and yank unopened boxes from the

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cooler. You'll return to the boy and tear one box open like a split piñata, dousing his body with ice cream sandwiches. You won't dare glance toward Gregor, but you'll see his gun always looming over the cooler lip, trained toward the boy's wincing face.

You will tell the boy to eat. He wants ice cream? Eat the ice cream! Eat it all, you'll demand, or Gregor will fire bullets and the bullets will black out his mind forever. You'll scream at him, demand that he move faster as his fingers stumble across the packaging. You'll hang so deeply into the cooler with your head and your curses that if Gregor fired, his bullets would catch you, too. Even as the boy chews down those cold slabs, you'll dump a dozen more popsicles over his chest. Chocolate-darkened saliva will pool against his chin. Loose pellets of dry ice will begin to fog against his clothes and bare arms. He'll flinch at the frozen burns and chew. He will close his eyes.

Right now you are furious, listening to these predictions. Right now you can't imagine because you are gentle and you understand clearly that afterward there will be no hope of burying the shame of this moment from memory. But just wait and you'll see. There is no need now for anyone to substantiate the awful thrill that you'll soon feel slicing up your heart. ●

Solution to the Mystery Crossword

E	L	S	A	■	A	S	E	A	T	■	C	A	R	R
R	E	A	P	■	T	H	A	N	E	■	A	G	U	E
G	A	S	P	■	H	O	R	D	E	■	R	E	I	D
■	S	H	A	D	O	W	S	I	N	E	D	E	N	■
■	■	■	R	I	L	E	■	■	S	R	I	■	■	■
A	G	L	E	T	■	D	J	S	■	N	O	M	A	D
D	R	E	N	C	H	■	A	A	A	■	■	E	T	O
D	E	A	T	H	I	S	M	Y	S	H	A	D	O	W
L	E	N	■	■	D	E	E	■	P	A	N	E	L	S
E	N	T	E	R	■	C	S	A	■	S	T	A	L	E
■	■	■	L	O	S	■	■	S	A	T	E	■	■	■
■	W	A	L	K	I	N	G	S	H	A	D	O	W	■
N	I	N	E	■	L	A	R	U	E	■	A	M	A	S
E	D	E	R	■	O	P	E	R	A	■	T	A	L	E
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HEAVEN'S GATE

by Judith Cutler

"All this building work at the Big House that Mrs. Pearce mentioned the other day, extensions and that," Tom Withers, the landlord of the Straight Furrow, began, swabbing an imaginary spot on the bar, polished to a deep glow by generation upon generation of loving hands.

"With all respect to Mrs. Pearce," George Hardy interrupted him, clearing his throat and taking a sip of ale, "I'll believe it when I see it. Mr. Winspeare's already splashed out more money than's good for him on that great car of his."

In July of 2003, the first of Judith Cutler's novels to be published in the U. S., *Power on Her Own*, was released by St. Martin's Press, followed this year by *Staying Power*. A Canterbury native, Ms. Cutler has, to date, penned six books in the series to which those novels belong, and she has another fifteen-book series in print through Hodder & Stoughton in the U.K., all garnering excellent reviews. ¶

"True. But that might mean he's got a lot to splash."

"Not to mention his house parties with that French champagne." George shook his head. "That type—money goes faster through their fingers than water."

"Mrs. Pearce seemed pretty sure. It should do you a bit of good, George."

George Hardy picked up the note of envy in his old friend's voice. He couldn't blame him. No one here in the village had any money to spare, and it was hard not to begrudge another man's change of fortunes. No, in this home fit for heroes, no one could afford more than half a pint, nursed carefully all evening. Look at the men, hogging the feeble fire as they hunched over their dominoes and cribbage boards. Not that they were bad fellows. No, if the rebuilding came his way, he'd be proud to take a good half-dozen of them and set them to work. Not Frank, of course. What little the gas had left him for lungs wouldn't cope with heaving bricks or mixing cement. And though he'd tried hard, Frank'd

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never made much of a fist of reading and writing. Poor devil, the most he'd get out of this new prosperity would be someone else standing rounds for everyone, like they used to do when the Old Squire had turned up trumps after a good win on those horses of his. Not that they'd come home very often. "Poor Sir Hubert," he sighed aloud.

Tom snorted into his half. "Don't you start feeling sorry for one of the gentry. Sir Hubert could have housed half the parish backstairs in that great pile of his, and never been troubled by bumping into one of us."

"True. But to lose both your sons at the Front—you have to feel sorry for any man."

"Happened to a lot, rich *and* poor." There was no doubt with whom Tom's sympathies lay.

"And then to lose that nevvy of his: The lad leads a charmed life all through the war and then he goes down with the influenza, just when Sir Hubert thought he was training him up nicely to take over the estate."

"You're right," Tom conceded. "The old man seemed to give up then, didn't he? He'd still ride round the village on that great bay of his, expecting the lads to tug their forelocks and the young maids to curtsey—but you could see his heart wasn't in it."

The two men sipped, but not deeply, shaking their heads sadly.

"Come on, George," Tom said at last. "You'll be all right. This new squire'll turn things round. You'll see if he won't. I know he's not really one of the Family, but he's got money, no doubt of that, and you can't deny we could do with a bit of it round here. It's not just building work, and the lads you'll need to take on. It's all the below-stairs staff—they'll need more than just Mr. Cobbold and Mrs. Pearce to run things—and decorators and gardeners and even a groundsman for the cricket pitch. You'll soon be up to your old magic with the ball, George."

"I'll be too old," George said doubtfully. "Like I was too old to fight for king and country."

"You—too old to play cricket? No, never. It'll be like old times again." There was no jealousy in his voice now, just honest hope.

George nodded. He dug in his pocket and checked his few coins. Yes, there were just enough for another half all round. They raised their glasses. "To the new squire!"

As soon as he got home, George covered the big kitchen table with paper and his ruler and pencils, tiny in his hams of hands. For all Tom Withers had thought the Big House too much for one family, George knew that it wouldn't be big enough for a man bent on entertaining his rich friends, as rumour said Mr. Winspeare meant to do. As Tom had said, Mr. Winspeare wasn't one of the Family at

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all, just a rich nobody who'd made a mint out of the war and bought up the ailing estate. There'd always be some to cavil, wouldn't there? But George wished the rumours weren't quite so specific. He didn't like the thought of working for a man who'd sent troops out to the trenches with cardboard, not leather, for the soles of their boots. The poor devils had been blown to pieces quick enough—it would have been better if they'd met their Maker with warm, dry feet.

He picked up his pencil again. He must concentrate. It wasn't just for himself he was doing this, but for all the families in the village that would benefit. It'd be a real challenge, trying to add wings to the Georgian house that had never been much more than a family home. But he'd seen pictures of other houses transformed into real grand affairs without losing the original proportions. Symmetry, that was the answer. Decent, simple symmetry.

Perhaps it was too ambitious to start planning the house extension. Perhaps he should limit himself to something less grand but just as necessary. Mr. Winspeare would want a gatehouse, wouldn't he? A man with a huge estate like that would *need* a gatehouse. Nothing grand: just a neat cottage for the gatekeeper with a pair of elegant pillars to support—yes—wrought-iron gates. He was sure he'd seen pictures of just the thing in the books of architectural designs he'd picked up cheap at the auction over Marsh Burton way. When the family over there was selling up their old library to pay death duties, that was it.

But he mustn't reach the books down now. The grandfather clock in the parlour was inexorably striking eleven, and that was his bedtime. None of this turning day and night on their head for him. In London, they might dance the night away and go to bed at dawn. But he knew that there was a time for rising and a time for sleeping, and if he was to be up and about by six, like his father before him, there was no getting fanciful ideas to set his head racing now.

None of his ideas were fanciful. George kept a grip on his imagination and saw to that. They were honest, decent plans, costed out brick by brick, beam by beam. He'd be able to tell Mr. Winspeare to the nearest florin how much his outlay would be—materials and men alike. So many days for skilled men here; so many hours for labourers there. It took him a matter of weeks—but then, he had time to spare. No one in the village had any money to spend on any but the most essential maintenance. Mrs. Fellows's roof had succumbed yet again; the vicarage chimney would blow down if he didn't tackle it now. But that was work he could do on his own, mostly. It didn't put food into other mouths. With quiet determination he rolled up the wide sheets of paper and tied them neatly.

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Any day now he'd present them to Mr. Winspeare. As soon as he came back to the village.

In due course, Mr. Winspeare came, sleek and polished like his car. But he didn't come alone. And he didn't come quietly. He swept in, he and his friends, in a veritable procession. If the lads didn't doff their caps or the girls drop their curtseys, it was because they didn't have time, and in any case were too busy choking on the swirling dust and acrid exhaust fumes. Mr. Winspeare believed in big cars and he believed in driving them fast. George found one of Mrs. Fellows's chickens fluttering round in a demented circle, a wing drooping and a leg clearly broken. As gently but as firmly as he could, he twisted its neck. There. He knew Mrs. Fellows wouldn't want to eat it; it had been a family friend too long. But in these lean times, she'd have to swallow sentiment with her dinner.

Mr. Cobbold was red to the ears with shame and embarrassment, but he stood his ground on the steps of the Big House and repeated what he'd said. That was what butlers did, no matter how old and wise they were, or how young and foolish their masters: They carried out orders. "I'm sorry, George, but that's what the new master says. He's too busy. He's seeing to his guests, George, that's what."

"But I've got to see him. He told me to come today—why, you brought the message yourself, Reg Cobbold."

The old man shook his head sadly. "I know I did. But now he's busy."

"What about his land agent? His man of business?"

"A London man, George, who comes down as and when. Not one of us. Mr. Winspeare says you can leave your card and he'll pass it on."

"Card! What's a man like me doing with a card?" George mimed a spit.

"It's all he would say, George. And if you ask me, you want to get on to it quick."

"Why don't you give me the card of this man of his—and I'll go straight up and talk to him."

Reg Cobbold shook his head. "You should know better than to ask, George, and that's a fact. Off you go, now—unless you've a mind to call round to the servants' hall and take tea with Mrs. Pearce?"

George gave him an old-fashioned look. He'd always been sweet on Jemima Pearce, back in the old days when she was Jemima Ford, and now she was a widow he admitted that he might still be. But if he expected to find her her usual serene self, face becomingly flushed by the heat from the range, he was mistaken. Her

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hair—now more silver than gold—was flying from its ugly cap, and if she'd been anyone else he'd have thought her near to hysterics. And who could blame her, surrounded as she was by stacks of hampers as high as his shoulder, attended by three drooping young serving men.

"I thought I was the one who needed a cup of tea," George said quietly. "Seems to me it's you. Why don't I make it and you take a tray through to your sitting room?"

"But George—"

"You do as I say, woman," he said gently. "I've boiled a kettle just the odd once or twice." And cooked all his own meals. He wouldn't say that he'd pined for Jemima—but he would admit he'd never seen anyone as comely or with such ways with a raised pie.

"Now why don't you tell me what's going on here?" he began, setting the china pot at her elbow and taking a respectful seat on a high-backed chair the opposite side of the fire.

"What isn't, George Hardy, what isn't? They come up here in their big cars and expect aired bedrooms and lashings of hot water—and you know as well as I that the Old Squire never did have the system fixed and that every drop of hot water has to be carried up in kettles. And the Old Squire's bed linen would disgrace a pauper. I offered to get girls in from the village—they're used to hard work and now the soldiers have come back and taken their jobs they've time on their hands and more. Then I changed my mind."

"He wouldn't have them?"

She shook her head. More strands of hair came adrift, and to his amazement she stripped off the cap and slung it onto the floor. "It's me. I wouldn't want decent girls under the same roof as these—well, I know they call themselves flappers, but I like to call a spade a spade. They're *doxies!*"

"Doxies?"

"You can tell me I'm old-fashioned, George Hardy, and I know the war's changed everything. But there's nothing wrong with decency. You tell me there is!"

George shook his head in silence.

"It's all picnics! Well, you saw the hampers. Even in the house. No decent meals at all. Plenty of drink, mind you. So in my kitchen I've got those—those creatures, boys you can hardly tell from girls with their mincing ways and rouge and lipstick. Above stairs is worse! There it's girls you can hardly tell from boys, with their shingled hair and cigarettes in holders this long and no—and no—"

He waited.

"And no underwear!" she concluded, as if infected by their rashness. "And it's worse than cigarettes, George. Things that they

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smell and potions they take. And they drink—it's cocktails here, cocktails there. I don't suppose there's a minute of the day when the whole lot are sober. They have to double up in the bedrooms, of course. But it's always been young men sharing, pretending they don't mind camp beds. Now when you take the morning tea you don't know who's going to be with—well, you don't need to know the details."

"You've got to remember the lads are back from soldiering, Jemima. They're bound to have a few high spirits—"

She was so worked up she ignored his use of her name. "Soldiers! That lot, soldiers! No, they were all in "Manufacturing"—manufacturing money for their own pockets, I have no doubt. Well, look at their cars. Rolls-Royces. Bentleys. Mr. Cobbold counted eighteen in the stable yard this morning. And they play that jazz music on their gramophones night and day. George, it's not decent, the lives they lead. Oh, why did they ever sell him the place, when it could have been a hospital?"

"A hospital?" There'd been a rumour in the village but nothing as definite as this.

"Yes. For those poor lads with faces—you know—hurt by shells and such like. But now we've got *him* instead."

When he got the contract for all the changes, he'd take her away from all this. But all he could do now was reach and press her hand briefly. Before she could fire up, he stood, gathering his roll of plans and telling her what he'd hoped. As he talked, she let him spread the plans on the table, commenting occasionally, "Now, you could get Harry Raven to do that," or, "Even Frank might manage that." They walked slowly to the yard together. Suddenly she gripped his arm. "That's him! That's Mr. Winspeare. What's he doing here, in the servants' quarters?"

Mr. Winspeare was as happy to ignore the conventions as his guests, it seemed. In his shirtsleeves and a cerise waistcoat, he was deep in discussion with his chauffeur, an outsider who rarely appeared in the village without the protection of his vehicle and whose uniform brought back uncomfortable memories to some of the men.

"Go on—now's your chance!" Jemima whispered. "Go and talk to him." She pushed him so hard he almost staggered.

"Mr. Winspeare! Mr. Winspeare!"

At last Winspeare turned. And, spluttering an explanation, George could see reflected in his cold clear eyes exactly what Winspeare saw—an old buffoon of a man, red-faced with embarrassment and passion, scattering badly rolled tubes of paper.

"Plans? Well, you can leave them if you like, old fellow. I'll see what my chappie has to say." He seized them so roughly that he crumpled them, and chucked them into the back of the car.

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Months passed. The village ignored the Big House, as far as it was able, and the Big House certainly ignored the village, apart from one or two young women, one of whom shortly implored her intended to marry her out of hand, the other disappearing to London, but not before the results of her activities had started to show. Less frequently, sometimes not for weeks at a time, guests surged up the still-ungated drive, hampers of food and drink jostling for space. Perhaps Winspeare's sins would have been easier to forgive if he'd shopped locally, but no, names like Fortnum and Mason and Harrods bedecked all the provisions. Jemima Pearce's attempts to bring the house to order were as vain as the villagers' hopes that the cricket field might be reinstated.

Then, one day, a miracle seemed to be in progress. Men with measuring tapes were seen down by the drive. George went to look himself. Yes, a team of navvies—Irish to a man, by the sound of them—was digging deep. They were ready to build foundations. He didn't know whether to weep with delight that the hours and days of planning and drawing had not been fruitless, or to knock the head off the man who'd used his ideas without paying for them and without using his men.

Jemima counselled his previous approach. "It paid off last time, didn't it? You just want to catch him on his own and have a quiet word. Quiet, mind, George. I mean, Mr. Hardy."

George was walking home after Evensong one Sunday, trying desperately how he could save the church tower without bankrupting either himself or the church. There was Mr. Winspeare, flash in boater and white flannels, standing by his parked car, staring into the footings of the new gateposts. They were much bigger than those on his drawings—George could see that, even though mist was beginning to swirl up the valley.

"Your drawings?" Winspeare looked completely blank. "Oh, I talked to some London wallah. Your design was . . ." He scuffed at a stone.

"Plain, like. Very plain. In keeping with the house, sir."

"Plain? Oh, old hat, old boy. These days you've got Art Nouveau or Arts and Crafts and all sorts of things to choose from. I fancy something a bit classier, myself. No, you oicks from the sticks wouldn't understand."

"I could have built whatever you wanted, sir."

"Something like this?"

"Something like what?"

Winspeare raised his eyes heavenwards, then managed a smile that might in anyone else have been apologetic. "Of course, you haven't seen the drawings, have you? Well, my man, present your-

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self sometime tomorrow, and if I have a moment, I might show them to you—then you can see the difference between provincial sketches and real architecture."

"I wouldn't want to interrupt you when you're with all your friends," George protested.

"Living the bachelor life at the moment. Mind you, I'm off tomorrow evening—motoring down to join them at the coast. Spot of tootling round the Continent, don't you know."

The slang sounded odd coming from a man George realised wasn't quite as young as he made himself out to be.

"That'll be nice, sir. So what time shall I come—about four?"

"Why not?" Winspeare waved an idle hand and got back into his car, which purred away like a well-trained animal. Not the sort of noises that were coming, these days, from George's lorry.

It being a fine afternoon, George gently walked up to the Big House. No point in hurrying. Whatever time he arrived, he was sure Winspeare would keep him waiting. And there was no work in the village, none that would pay, anyway. On his way up, he passed a dismal Reg Cobbold shrugging on a coat. "Being sent on errands at my age," he was grumbling. "Why doesn't the man keep proper staff? He says he's going to when the place is finished, of course."

"That's good news," George said.

"Hmph," Reg replied. "He'll get them through some London register office, you mark my words. He'll turn his nose up at any of us, same as he did your plans—you see if he doesn't." Off he stomped.

George knocked at the back door, hoping to be admitted by Jemima. But there was no response, so he let himself in, calling softly as he did so. No Jemima; no Reg—how could he find Winspeare? He couldn't go round yelling and throwing open doors, could he?

Perhaps Jemima was resting in her room—an unlikely situation, knowing Jemima, but worth checking. No. No sign of her.

He was just scratching his head over the whole business when he heard a scream and a crash. Then another scream.

He ran blindly till he found the source of the commotion. Winspeare's library, by the looks of it. Unrolled on the table were two sets of architectural drawings. But Winspeare wasn't looking at either of them. He was lying facedown, his blood and what George knew must be his brains oozing from his temple. Beside him lay a paperweight. Shuddering and screaming, alternately staring at her bloodstained hands and wringing them, stood Jemima, a foot from him. Her bodice was torn to the waist: No need to guess what Winspeare had been doing.

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He removed his jacket and wrapped it gently round her. Then he touched—as he knew he should, but knew was pointless—the side of Winspeare's neck. No. No pulse.

"Where does he keep the keys to his car?" he asked quietly.

"Why? What are you going to do?"

"Get rid of him, of course."

"You don't think—the police?"

"Do you?" He held her gaze.

She shook her head. "What are you going to do?"

"I don't quite know yet. Give me a moment to think. You go and get yourself cleaned up, my girl. And then make yourself a cup of tea. Well, both of us a cup, I should think." As an afterthought, he added, "What time's Reg Cobbold likely to be back?"

"Not till after ten. Mr.—" she stopped as she glanced at the body—"*he* sent him down to the village to post some letters—the sort of job a stableboy should do! It's Reg's free evening: He said he'd go straight on down to his nephew's for a bite of tea and a look at his early broad beans."

"Good. Now, off you go and leave me to think."

Well, he'd accomplished it. He'd welcome a good bowl of porridge and maybe a rasher or two of Jemima's bacon to follow. He'd never known himself so tired and hungry, not even after a lifetime of hard work. The body was safely under several feet of rubble and concrete under the foundations already started for the house extensions. The car was on a cliff-top near the coast, Winspeare's valise left carelessly on the backseat. That had been Jemima's idea, and he'd thought it a good touch. Then he'd had to walk back across country, arriving only minutes before Len the postman brought a batch of serious-looking letters in thick brown envelopes.

"Bills, I shouldn't wonder," Jemima whispered, as she laid them on the study desk.

She'd tidied the room beautifully, cleaning unmentionable brown spots from the carpet and curtains. She'd left the drawings where they were, George's and the London architect's, side by side, George's lines plain and strong against a tangle of curlicues and gargoyles and turrets and flying buttresses and goodness knows what else. George shook his head in disbelief. Hadn't the man learnt anything over the last forty years?

"He said he wanted to make it a dream castle," Jemima observed.

"Nightmare, more like," George muttered. "Look, there's blood spattered on it: I think we should burn it, don't you?"

No one seemed surprised that Winspeare had left without trace. When his car was found, everyone agreed he'd done a runner. His

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debtors sold off the Big House lock, stock, and barrel, as quickly as they could, so the hospital for disfigured ex-servicemen came to the village after all. Since the plans for extensions were still lying in the dusty study, the trustees assumed that that was what was in progress, and simply engaged a local builder—the navvies, unpaid, having vanished, leaving no more than the first few rows of bricks in the gothic gateway that Winspeare had flaunted.

Tom Withers pulled a fluffy-headed pint, admiring the light through the tawny brew as it settled. Frank coughed his thanks and joined the circle of drinkers on the bench in the warm sun, listening to the creak of the new signboard in the lazy wind.

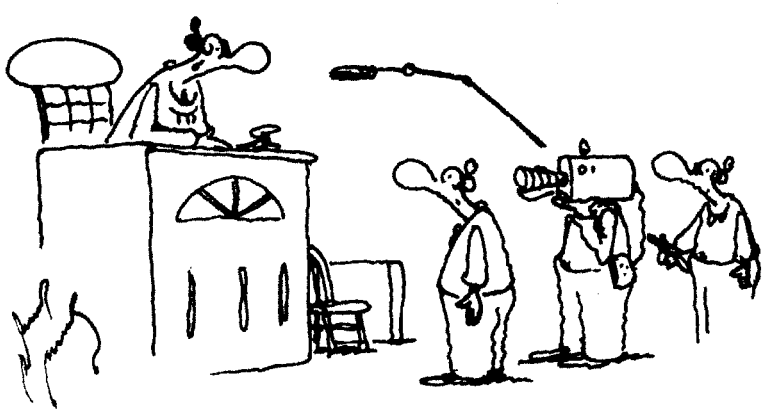
"Have one yourself," George said.

"Don't mind if I do," Tom said. "So everything's worked out all right in the end. Plenty of work for everyone. Lads building and maintaining the place; wenches training up as pretty little nurses. Though I hear there won't be a job for Mrs. Pearce, on account of hospitals don't need housekeepers." There might have been a twinkle in his eye.

"I know someone as might," George said.

"Funny business all round—Winspeare doing a flit and leaving all those debts. But you never could trust a man who wanted a gatehouse that looked less like a decent man's than Hell's Gate."

George didn't reply. The way he felt now, it was more like Heaven's Gate. He supped his pint, and smiled quietly. ●



"The jury has found you innocent. Now let's see how America voted."

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LEOPOLD IN THE VINEYARD

by Edward D. Hoch

When Ed Hoch created Captain Leopold he decided to let him age in real time, but that meant he had to figure out a way to retire the popular policeman at some point. Ever since his official retirement from the force, Leopold's been coming back now and then as an amateur detective. Is he ever going to give up sleuthing? "I was planning to retire him for good after the 100th story featuring him," Hoch said, "but this is his 105th case." So who knows . . . ?

Having twice retired from his position as captain of the city's violent crimes squad, Leopold had developed a distaste for the endless cases that seemed to intrude on his so-called leisure years. One evening in late September, when the wind off the Sound reminded them of autumn's arrival, he suggested to his wife Molly that they take an extended vacation away from the city, to someplace where he wasn't known.

"What about my job?" she asked as she brought out a bottle of red wine to accompany the roast beef she'd prepared for dinner. She was a trial lawyer with a schedule dependent upon the whims of judges.

"How does your schedule look?" he asked.

"I'm clear for the next couple of weeks but the Apex case goes before the judge on October twentieth. I'll be tied up for weeks with that one."

They talked no more about it that night, but the following day Molly came home with news. "My brother Mark phoned me at the office. He's wondering if we could come up to the winery for a few days." Mark Calendar was younger than Molly, with a wife and a three-year-old daughter. They'd been living in the Georgetown section of Washington until the change in administration trickled down to his job in the Department of Agriculture. By December of 2001, out of work and with few prospects in the nation's capital, Mark and Sarah had pooled their money and taken out loans to purchase a small winery in the Finger Lakes region of New York State.

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"How's he doing?" Leopold asked.

"All right, I guess. I told you they expanded and added a new vineyard last year. They've got a hundred and fifty acres now."

"I suppose we might take a drive up there sometime. I'd like to see it."

"It's just that—"

"What?"

"He's got some sort of problem. He'd like us to come this week if we could."

Leopold's heart sank. "It's not a police matter, is it?"

"I don't think so. Not yet. My brother's always been sort of vague. But he's never asked for help before."

There was no way out of it. "Can you get free?"

"Perhaps on Friday. If we leave early that would give us a long weekend."

It was about 250 miles from their home to Cayuga Lake in central New York. They drove through Ithaca at the lake's southern tip and then up the west side on Route 89. The Dogwatch Vineyard was about halfway along the slender lake, on a hillside commanding a magnificent view of the water.

"How did you ever find this place?" Molly asked, hugging her brother and exchanging kisses with Sarah.

Leopold and Mark shook hands and he launched into his story. "The previous owner, a fellow named Wade Southby, was in some sort of legal trouble. We never found out just what, but he had to sell the vineyard at a loss and disappear for a while. We happened to be in the right place at the right time."

The place was buzzing with activity. A dozen cars were in the parking lot and Mark explained it was the season for vineyard tours and wine tasting. "It's harvest time," Sarah said. "The busiest we've been since we bought the place." She was an attractive woman in her late thirties, wearing jeans and a flannel shirt that identified her as a working wife. The extra pounds she'd added during her pregnancy had been quickly shed and she seemed to have aged little since Mark married her some seven years earlier.

"How's our little niece?" Molly asked.

"Megan is fine," Sarah answered, a proud mother. "You'll see her after her nap. Mark, show them their room while I check on Megan. Then we can do the tour."

"Need help with that bag, Captain?" Mark asked, taking a smaller one from his sister.

"I can manage, thanks." Leopold started up the stairs. "You don't have to call me Captain, you know. I'm just a retired old man."

"Well—" He seemed uncertain about what to say.

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"Call me Jules. It's my name, even though I never liked it."

The upstairs guest room was cozy and colorful, with a flowery quilt over the big double bed. "It's lovely!" Molly told her brother. "And look at the view!"

Leopold had to admit it was spectacular. They were looking down the hill directly at the lake, with the vineyard off to the south side. He could see workers with mechanical grape pickers moving among the rows, quickly harvesting the crop. Mark came over to stand by him. "Gathering the grapes takes a certain amount of planning. They don't all ripen at the same time."

"How'd you learn all this?"

"Partly through my job in Agriculture, and I took a course down at Cornell after we bought the place. Sarah's been a great help to me."

"Then what seems to be your problem?"

Mark sighed. "We'll tell you over dinner. First I want to give you the tour."

"It's a year-round job," he explained as he drove them around the vineyard in his Jeep. Leopold was with him in the front seat and Molly and Sarah were in back with little Megan. "In the winter we prune the vines and graft new vines onto different roots. In the spring we clear away weeds and tie the vines to the wires of each row. The grapes flower in June and July. By August the berries are changing color as a certain level of sugar is reached. We're picking them selectively now, as you can see. We're lucky we have someone to look after Megan while Sarah helps out."

"You have a lot of land here," Leopold observed.

"We hope those trees and underbrush to the south will be replaced by new vineyards within two years," Mark said.

"When's the grape stomping?" Molly wanted to know.

Her brother laughed. "No more grape stomping and no more oak barrels, at least not here. We spent a small fortune installing stainless-steel vats. They allow far better quality control during the fermentation process, which can last days to weeks."

"I thought oak barrels were important for flavor," Leopold said. "Back during Prohibition some bootleggers bought charred barrels from Canadian whiskey distilleries and brought them across the border, all perfectly legal. Then they filled the barrels with denatured alcohol and let it stand for a few weeks. It absorbed the flavor of whatever had been in the barrels originally and came out tasting like scotch or bourbon or whatever."

Mark Calendar smiled. "If we want a bit of the old oak flavor, we throw a few wood chips into the vat—something that horrifies the French. Or if it's been a poor growing season, sugar is sometimes added during fermentation. Happily, there are few poor seasons in

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the Finger Lakes. We struggled a bit last year because it was our first season and we were still learning, but things are lots better this time around. Our wine-tasting room has been crowded all month."

"Don't people just travel around to the wine tastings to get high?" Molly asked her brother.

"Sure, some do, but we warn them of the new alcohol limits for drivers in New York State. Most people sip a little, then leave with a bottle or two, sometimes a case."

They drove back to the winery and he led them on a tour of the cool, damp cellar where the fermenting vats stood. Like a professor instructing his class, he stood beside some unused wine barrels he kept for show and explained to Leopold and Molly the differences between red and white wines, and the part tannin played in the coloring process. "Red wines age in the bottle. Most of the tannin is neutralized, but the remaining tannin content determines the degree of dryness." He showed them the filtration operation before bottling, and the storage area where the bottled wines completed the ageing process. "Those wooden barrels are just for show," he explained, pointing to a half-dozen large casks at one end of the cellar. "They came with the place."

Back in their living quarters Leopold realized it was already time for dinner. He and Molly washed up while Sarah put the finishing touches on a welcome meal. They knew there'd be a variety of Dogwatch wines with dinner and they weren't disappointed. There was a dry white wine with hors d'oeuvres and a Bordeaux-type red with the steaks. A sweet white wine was served with dessert.

"I haven't eaten this well in ages," Leopold admitted. "Molly often works late and we go out for dinner."

"You should learn to cook," Sarah chided him.

"I can grill beef for summer cookouts," he replied. "That's about it."

The afternoon had been gray with clouds and the autumn night descended quickly, darkening the sky before seven. As they started their cheesecake dessert, Leopold suggested it was time to discuss his brother-in-law's problem.

"I was just going to—" Mark began, then fell silent as a throbbing sound filled the sky from the direction of the lake.

"What's that?" Molly asked. "A helicopter?"

"It's one of the reasons we need help," Sarah told them. "It comes every night, usually later than this."

"Come on," Mark said grimly, leaving his dessert and starting for the back door. Leopold and Molly followed gamely along.

A young dark-haired woman running toward the house met them in the backyard. "Mark!" she called out.

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"I hear it, Suzie."

The black helicopter, barely visible against the night sky, came in from the lakeside across the vineyard, then made a sharp turn and flew over the house. "Who is it?" Leopold asked.

"I wish I knew. One of these nights I'm going to take a shot at it."

"Mark," his wife called from the steps. "Come back inside and stop talking foolish."

Suzie followed them in and Mark introduced them. "Suzie Trotter, this is my sister Molly Leopold and her husband. Suzie is in charge of our wine-tasting and general promotions."

In the full light of the kitchen Suzie was revealed as tall and very attractive, with a ready smile even when she was talking business. "That's every night this week. We have to do something."

"I called the sheriff yesterday. He claims not to know a thing about it."

"It's always the same?" Leopold asked. "The helicopter makes a single pass over the vineyards?"

"That's right, but at different times. The others were all between ten and midnight."

"What else is there? Sarah said that was one of the reasons you needed help."

She spoke up. "The previous owner has contacted us. He wants to buy the place back."

"That shouldn't be difficult. Tell him he can have it for twice what you paid."

Mark shook his head. "He's already offered pretty close to that and I said no. Sarah and I love this place. We're not about to sell it."

"Who is this previous owner?"

"A man named Wade Southby. His parents had a vineyard in France before the war. They fled to America just before the Nazi occupation, bringing along enough money to buy this place. When they died he tried to carry on the family business, but within a few years he was forced to lay off his employees and shut down. That's when he put it up for sale."

"And now he wants it back."

Mark nodded. "You'll get to meet him tomorrow night. He's coming here for dinner. He insists he's making a serious offer and he begged me to hear him out. I agreed to do that, but I held out no hope for him."

"Is that everything?" Leopold asked.

Mark and his wife exchanged glances, but it was Suzie who spoke up. "There's Jerry Wax, our vineyard manager."

"What about him?"

Suzie deferred to her employers and Sarah spoke with some

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reluctance. "Well, he suddenly seems to have lots of money. He bought an expensive new SUV and a new Rolex watch. Mark asked him if he'd come into an inheritance and he said he'd had some luck up at the Turning Stone casino."

"He's never been a gambling man," Mark added. "He comes from a strict Amish family."

"People change," Leopold pointed out.

"We think he might be stealing from us," Sarah said. "Suzie saw him putting a big bag of something in his car trunk one night and when she asked what it was he got very nervous. He might be stealing wine from us but we can't prove it."

"You believe his Amish upbringing would keep him from gambling but not from stealing?"

"Well—" she began and then fell silent.

"Perhaps I can meet him in the morning," Leopold suggested.

It was later, when they were about to retire, that he heard the familiar thumping of the helicopter's return. Leopold hurried downstairs and found Mark on the back porch, staring into the darkness. "It's the first night he's come back." Even in the dim light Leopold could see his face was pale with fear.

In the morning, before the others were up, Leopold found Molly's brother alone in the kitchen. "You're up early. Been outside?"

Mark Calendar nodded. "I went to check the vineyards, the grapes we haven't yet harvested."

"Find anything?"

"No. Nothing visible."

"You think that helicopter comes over at night to spray them, don't you?"

"The thought crossed my mind," he admitted. "The wrong chemicals could ruin our entire harvest."

"Who'd want to do that?"

He shrugged. "Someone trying to force us off the property. The previous owner, maybe."

"Mr. Southby."

"Perhaps."

"Let's see what happens at dinner tonight."

Mark readily agreed. "There'll be eight of us. In addition to Southby I've asked Jerry Wax and Suzie."

"Why Wax?"

"I just want to see how he acts around Southby. He worked in the vineyard when Southby owned the place, but Southby fired him."

"That's seven. Who else?"

"A woman from Seneca Falls named Pauline Fitzgerald. She's an old friend of Southby's, and when I suggested the dinner party he

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asked that I invite her. He had to ask what we'd be serving because she doesn't eat meat. Sarah was already planning filet of sole so there was no problem."

After breakfast, while Molly and her brother chatted, Leopold went for a walk in the vineyard. The section nearest the winery had been stripped of its grapes, but the mechanical grape pickers were still operating at the other end of the vineyard. He walked out that way until he spotted a stocky young man wearing a wide-brimmed hat and sunglasses. He had a soft indoor face but seemed to be in charge. "Are you Jerry Wax?"

"That's me," the man admitted without taking his eyes off the grape-picking machine. "What can I do for you?"

"My name's Leopold. I'm Mark Calendar's brother-in-law, visiting for a few days. I wanted to ask you about the helicopter we heard last night."

"Yeah, Sarah told me it came over twice after dark. I have a room with an Amish family on Route 414. Didn't hear a thing over there."

"Is there an airport near here?"

"Sure, a little one on Martin Road. Never saw a helicopter there, though."

"Do you think someone in the copter could be spraying the vines to damage the grapes?"

"Doubt it," he answered with a shrug. "They look fine to me. A good harvest this year."

Leopold smiled and started walking toward the adjoining field. "I guess we'll be seeing you later, at dinner tonight."

Wade Southby seemed at first glance to be a somewhat dapper man past middle age. It was only after Leopold had studied him for a few moments that he became aware of the frayed cuffs on his shirt and the not-quite-invisible stain on his necktie. "You've done wonders with this place," he was telling Mark and Sarah. "Its value has certainly increased."

"Thank you," Sarah replied. "It's still not for sale."

He merely smiled. "I brought you a bottle of California wine for dinner, though I know you'll want to serve your own. Still, you might try this sometime."

She accepted the bottle graciously. "Thank you, we will."

When Pauline Fitzgerald arrived he greeted her with a hug and a kiss. "So good to see you again after two years," he told her. She was an attractive blond woman in her forties, well dressed in a conservative manner. During their conversation it developed that she worked at the Women's Hall of Fame in Seneca Falls.

"Come see us while you're in town," she suggested, crossing a pair of shapely legs. "We've done a lot with it since your last visit."

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"I may do that. I'm thinking of relocating in this area. I've even made an offer to buy back Dogwatch."

"Really?" She looked to Mark for confirmation.

"It's not for sale," he told her. "Sarah and I plan on being here for a good long time."

Suzie Trotter joined them and presently Jerry Wax came in from the vineyard. When he saw Southby in a jacket and tie he was quick to apologize for his work clothes. "I didn't realize—"

"That's all right, Jerry," Sarah assured him. "You look fine."

"We were late doing the harvesting, but we finished most of the section."

"That's good," Mark told him. "Everything all right? No irregularities?"

Wax must have known he was referring to speculation about the helicopter flights. "Not a thing. Perfectly normal."

Mark served a blush wine before dinner, and seemed pleased when Southby complimented him on it. "I'd stack this up against those California zinfandels," he said. "What do you folks think?"

There was general agreement around the table, with Pauline Fitzgerald singing its praises. "You've done wonders with this place, Mark. No wonder Wade wants to buy it back!"

"I've told him several times it's not for sale."

Wade Southby pretended exasperation. "I'm hoping to wear you down."

"How? By sending helicopters over the vineyards every night?" Mark's tone was light, trying to keep the accusation only half-serious, and Southby ignored it as if he didn't understand the joke. Sarah quickly retreated to the kitchen to see how dinner was coming. Little Megan was already in bed and she had to be checked on, too.

"Well," Southby decided, "I suppose I could look around for another vineyard that might be for sale in the Finger Lakes. Do you still have those old wine barrels my family used?"

"They're just decorations for the tours now. We use stainless-steel vats."

"If I find another vineyard maybe you'd sell me those barrels. I'd like to keep some connection to my parents. They're the ones who started me in this business."

"I don't know that I'd want to sell them," Mark said, not holding out much hope.

Suzie was helping remove the wineglasses and prepare for the main course. She opened two bottles of white wine and placed them on the table. "No decanting here," she told them. "We want you to see our label."

Southby shifted his attention to Pauline Fitzgerald, reminiscing about people they'd known in their younger days. "I remember

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Jerry, here," she said at one point. "Didn't he work for you?"

Jerry Wax seemed embarrassed that the subject had come up. "Just briefly," he muttered.

"Yes," Southby said, addressing the young man for the first time. "Seems to me I caught you smoking pot on the job."

"And fired me on the spot."

"Let's not get into any of that," Mark said, trying to keep the peace. "Jerry has helped me a great deal with the harvest."

"I'm sure," Southby said, pushing back his chair. "Is there a place here where I could smoke a cigar without bothering people? Out on the back porch, perhaps?"

"Right this way," Sarah said, leading him through the kitchen. Leopold decided to follow along.

Southby looked up at the bright walls and newly installed cabinets. "You've certainly fixed it up since my day."

"It could use a lot more fixing. We hope to build an addition on the place as our family grows."

"You're planning more children?"

She shrugged. "Those things happen." She went back to the stove. The sole filets had been halved lengthwise, with the eight halves rolled, fastened with picks, and placed in a large skillet. She added a cup of boiling water and some other ingredients, topping it off with a cup of white wine.

"That should be delicious," Southby commented. He turned to Leopold. "Join me in a cigar?"

"I haven't smoked in years, though I'll take some night air with you."

The back porch looked down toward the lake. It was a cool, crisp night, and Leopold found himself scanning the sky for any sign of the mystery helicopter. "You were a detective captain?" Southby asked.

"For more years than I like to remember. It's relaxing to be out of it."

"Your wife seems quite nice."

"She is, and smart, too. She has a law practice back home."

They chatted about the Finger Lakes climate and the techniques of tending to a vineyard. The previous owner seemed very knowledgeable, with a true feel for the earth. "I don't doubt that they're doing a fine job," he admitted, "but it was my family's winery and I want it back. I should never have let it get away from me."

He finished the cigar and they went back inside. Sarah and Suzie were just removing the eight strips of filet of sole from the skillet and placing them on individual plates. "These smell superb!" Southby said. "Let me help you serve them."

"You're a guest!"

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"Nonsense! You must serve them all while they're still warm!"

"Be careful. Those plates are hot."

He picked up the first two, apparently with some difficulty, and carried them into the dining room. Sarah and Suzie followed right behind with two each and Leopold saw that he must join in with the final two. Southby had started at the head of the table with Mark and Pauline Fitzgerald. Suzie brought plates for Southby and Molly, while Sarah positioned hers at Leopold's and Suzie's places. The last two, in Leopold's hands, went to Jerry Wax and Sarah herself.

Mark, as host, circled the table with the wine bottle, filling the first four glasses in turn, starting with Pauline's. Then he used the second bottle for the remaining four, ending with his own. "This was our best dry white wine from last season," he explained. "We only have a few bottles left."

"Very good," Southby pronounced. "I would compare it with the best—"

His verdict was interrupted by a distant throbbing noise that quickly grew louder. The helicopter was back.

Southby led the way onto the back porch, with Mark, Leopold, and Suzie close behind. The others clustered in the doorway. As it had before, the helicopter came over without lights, visible only by pale moonlight. Then it was gone.

"We'd better get back to our fish," Sarah urged, "before it cools off."

While they sampled the main course, Pauline Fitzgerald said, "It must be a military training flight, something like that. Isn't there an Air Force base near here?"

"Not since Sampson closed," Southby told her, "and that was years ago."

The filet of sole seemed to meet with universal approval, and was followed by crème brûlée and a sweet dessert wine. "You're a wonderful cook!" Pauline complimented Sarah.

"You're too kind."

"No, it's true!" Molly agreed. "I'm happy to see my brother is so well cared for."

The after-dinner conversation shifted to the Women's Hall of Fame where Pauline worked. She tried to entice Southby into visiting it the following day, but he'd fallen oddly silent. Jerry Wax excused himself, saying he had a few last-minute chores, while Suzie was cleaning up and loading the dishwasher.

"You'll have to excuse me," Southby said finally. "My stomach seems a bit off and I have this burning in my throat."

"We had an extra bathroom installed down here," Sarah told him. "Let me show you the way."

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She returned, nervously rubbing her hands. "I hope it wasn't my food that upset him."

"Of course not!" Mark told her. "We all ate the same thing."

But when Southby hadn't returned from the bathroom in twenty minutes she suggested her husband see if he was all right. Almost at once Mark called out for Leopold's help. "God, he's curled up on the floor! And he's been vomiting. What should we do?"

"Call for an ambulance," Leopold ordered. "Right away."

Southby was unconscious when they rushed him to the hospital. By morning he was dead. The attending physician informed Leopold that he strongly suspected the man had been poisoned.

Sergeant Ambrose of the State Police Criminal Investigation Division, a man with large eyes and a small moustache, arrived at the Dogwatch Vineyard at eight o'clock the following morning, shortly after Mark and Sarah—who confessed to getting very little sleep, worried as they were by Southby's sudden illness—got the news of Southby's death. He was accompanied by two uniformed officers and came right to the point.

"Mr. Calendar, we need to recover any and all food, drink, and dishes left over from your dinner party last night. The county medical examiner is running toxicology tests on the deceased's organs at this point, but it looks very much as if he was poisoned."

Molly and Sarah were still upstairs, but Leopold had been having coffee with Mark Calendar when the police arrived. "Go right ahead," Mark told them, escorting them to the kitchen. "I can't imagine you'll find anything, though. The dishes and utensils have been washed, of course."

The officers checked the refrigerator and the wastebasket, then one of them moved on to a plastic bag of rubbish on the back porch. "We'll want to take this along," Sergeant Ambrose told him.

"Go ahead."

The other officer, who'd remained in the kitchen, called out, "Here's something!"

Leopold found him standing by the stove, holding a slender vial between the fingers of his gloved hand. "Where'd you find that?"

"Right here," the officer pointed, "in this little space between the stove and the countertop."

"Bag it for evidence," Ambrose ordered. "Be careful. There might be fingerprints." Leopold feared they were already smudged, but said nothing. It wasn't his job anymore.

Following the search, Sergeant Ambrose sat down with them both to take their statements. Molly and her sister-in-law, hearing the voices, had dressed quickly and came downstairs to join them. Leopold listened to their accounts of the dinner and contributed his own, which added nothing. When they'd finished, he revealed

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to Ambrose that he was a retired detective captain.

"Then perhaps you can help us by shedding some light on this," the sergeant suggested.

"Let's wait for the forensic work first. You may be all wrong suspecting poison."

"We should know something later today. I'll phone you." He glanced at his watch. "Now I'd like to question the others who were at dinner. I believe Jerry Wax and Suzie Trotter are both employed here?"

"That's correct. I'll page them for you."

"And Pauline Fitzgerald? Is that the woman from Seneca Falls? I know her slightly. I'll catch her later."

Leopold decided that he wanted to catch the Fitzgerald woman, too, and later that morning he drove alone into Seneca Falls. Mark had directed him to the National Women's Hall of Fame on Fall Street, near the center of town. The two-story building was crammed with exhibits and he found Pauline upstairs, setting up a new display in one of the large glass cases.

"Mr. Leopold! So good to see you again. Have they learned anything about Wade's death?"

"Not yet. They're waiting for the toxicology report."

"I can't believe it was the food. We all had the same thing."

"I know." He glanced at his watch. "Look, it's almost noon. Can I buy you lunch while we talk?"

She swept back her blond hair in a gesture perhaps half-remembered from high school. "That would be fine. I just eat at a fast-food place in the next block."

They had burgers and fries while he complimented her on the Women's Hall of Fame. "I should bring my wife up to see it before we go back home."

"I hope so. Molly seems like a very liberated woman."

"Tell me about Wade Southby. You seem to have known him better than anyone else."

Pauline Fitzgerald sighed. "That involves telling you my life story, but I'll give you the condensed version. I was married and divorced before I was thirty, and moved to Seneca Falls about fifteen years ago to start a new life away from my ex. Given my situation, I suppose it wasn't too surprising that sooner or later I would hook up with Wade. He was the only son of an immigrant family who'd fled the Nazis. Still unmarried in middle age, he'd inherited the Dogwatch Vineyard when they died. For a time we were a couple, attending fund-raisers for the Women's Hall of Fame, greeting celebrities who came up here from Washington."

"Was the vineyard profitable in those days?"

"Mildly so. He had a great deal of competition in this area, and

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couldn't come up with the necessary money to expand. The local banks helped out for a time but then they stopped. I could see it was eating away at him. He'd take me out to dinner and the restaurant wouldn't accept his credit card. I paid for it a couple of times, and then I suppose he was too ashamed to invite me out again. After a few drinks he'd start talking wildly, telling me his folks had smuggled valuable French and Dutch paintings into the country when they fled here. He said if he found them his money problems would be over."

"Pardon me for asking, but was your relationship with Southby an intimate one?"

She hesitated only a moment. "Not successfully," she replied with a sad smile. "He was as unskilled at that as he was at running the vineyard."

"Yet he wanted you invited to last night's dinner party."

"Perhaps he only felt awkward at being the odd man."

Leopold insisted on paying the few dollars for their lunch. Walking back toward the Women's Hall of Fame, he asked, "Did you bear a grudge against him from the past?"

"Enough to poison him, do you mean? Hardly! In fact, we had lunch together at this same place just last week. He thought there was a possibility he might buy back Dogwatch or open a new winery. Wade was an old friend, but both of us knew it was nothing more."

By the time Leopold drove back down Route 89 to the vineyard, Sergeant Ambrose's car was gone. He saw Suzie Trotter heading toward the wine-tasting room and intercepted her. "Hello there," she greeted him. "I heard the bad news about Mr. Southby. Do they know what caused it yet?"

Leopold shook his head. "Still waiting for that fellow Ambrose to call. Tell me something, Suzie. Did you ever work here when Southby owned the place? I know Jerry Wax did and I was wondering about you."

She shook her head. "I worked at Sweetvine, over on Route 414. I knew Mr. Southby, of course, and I even dated Jerry a couple of times. But he wasn't for me."

"Why not?"

"Oh, he liked to smoke pot."

"Anything stronger than pot?"

"Not that I know of. It wasn't just that. He's not my type."

"You told Mark and Sarah you thought he might be stealing something."

She shrugged. "Well, I saw him putting this big plastic rubbish bag in his trunk. It seemed odd. I wondered if he might be stealing healthy shoots for another winery."

"Did they question him about it?"

Suzie shrugged. "I suppose that's one of the reasons they wanted

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you to visit. That and the helicopter and Wade Southby. All of a sudden there was just too much for them to handle, and at the peak of our season."

Sarah Calendar, who called to him from the front door, interrupted the conversation. "Sergeant Ambrose is on the phone. Mark and Molly have gone off and he asked to speak with you."

Leopold took the call and heard the sergeant's gruff voice on the other end. "It was arsenic," he confirmed. "The forensic lab ran a flame spectroscopy test. And that vial we found stuck between the stove and the counter had traces of liquid arsenic and white wine."

"Liquid arsenic?" Leopold dug through his memory. It was a long time since he'd handled a poisoning case. "That's supposed to be faster acting, isn't it?"

"Sure, the arsenic powder is already dissolved. Looks like it was put in his wineglass, though we can't prove that."

"There was a wine sauce on the fish, too. That may be more likely. It came from the kitchen. The bottled wine was poured at the table in full view."

"Southby was trying to buy back Dogwatch, wasn't he?"

"So I heard."

"Was there a certain enmity between him and Mark Calendar?"

"The man's my brother-in-law, Sergeant. I saw nothing that might lead to murder."

Ambrose said he'd be in touch later and hung up. When Molly and Mark returned from town Leopold told them about this latest development. "Do you think they'll arrest us?" Mark asked. "They might think Sarah and I poisoned him." He seemed genuinely worried.

"Of course not!" Molly insisted, trying to cheer him up. "Look, let us take you both out to dinner tonight. There must be some good restaurants in Seneca Falls."

He didn't resist. "I guess Sarah deserves it after all she's been through."

They found a place just outside of town where the food was good. "At least we're away from that damned helicopter for one night," Sarah commented.

But they weren't away from the poisoning of Wade Southby. The conversation drifted back to it, no matter how hard they tried to discuss grape growing and Amish customs and world politics. "One of us killed him," Molly said, seeming surprised at her own words.

"There were eight of us at dinner," Mark reminded them. "And people were in and out of the kitchen. Maybe Jerry had a grudge against him from the old days."

But Sarah shook her head. "I can't see him as a murderer. Not with poison, at least. He might punch someone, but he'd never poison them."

Mark smiled at her. "You're thinking poison is a woman's weapon?

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You've been reading too many of those old British mysteries."

They left soon after and headed back toward the Dogwatch. Leopold was driving and as they approached he could see the familiar flashing red lights of state police vehicles. "Something's wrong," he told them, increasing his speed a bit.

"Isn't that . . . ?" Mark pointed. "It's the helicopter, on the ground beyond the vineyard!"

He was right. The helicopter and three state police cars had converged on a spot near the underbrush at the south end of the property. Leopold pulled up as close as he could and they were out of the car. "It looks like they've got a prisoner," he called to the others, and led the way. Up ahead he could see Sergeant Ambrose and a number of uniformed officers. "What's going on?"

Ambrose turned to them. "We were at the house looking for you. Sorry I had to keep quiet about the helicopter, but it was a D.E.A. operation."

"Drugs?" Mark asked, seemingly bewildered.

The sergeant nodded. "They located a large patch of marijuana back in your underbrush a few weeks ago. But they needed to catch someone at the site, harvesting the crop. The helicopter flew over at night, with the crew using night-vision goggles, to try and spot someone. Tonight they did."

"Who?" Sarah asked, trying to see past the officers to the figure being loaded into a squad car.

"One of your employees, Jerry Wax. He was caught red-handed with a bag full of harvested plants."

"He must have heard them coming a mile away with that helicopter," Leopold commented.

"It comes in fast in the dark, with its lights out, and they've been checking at a different time each night. We had cars on the alert for when they spotted someone."

Mark tried to speak with his employee but the troopers kept him away. "I can't believe this is happening," Sarah muttered.

"I suppose that's what he had in the plastic bag when Suzie saw him," Leopold surmised. "She should have guessed it. She knew he smoked pot."

Mark had a sudden thought. "Isn't that why Southby fired him when he owned the place? When Southby came back in the picture, Jerry might have poisoned him to keep him quiet."

"I still can't see it," Sarah said with a shake of her head.

Molly nudged Leopold. "Come on, I can hear you thinking. What is it we're missing?"

"Can we go down to your fermenting room again?" he asked Mark. "Now that the helicopter mystery is cleared up, I have an idea about the rest of it."

"Of course," Mark said, leading the way, "but I don't know what

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you expect to find there."

Leopold followed along with the others, then went on alone to the far end of the cellar where the decorative wooden barrels stood as a reminder of days long past. "Southby was desperate to buy back this place, even offering twice what you'd paid for it. At dinner last night he asked to buy these old barrels to help decorate another winery, but he was again rebuffed. We must consider the possibility that the barrels were his main objective all along. Do these tops come off?"

Mark Calendar frowned. "I suppose so. We never bothered to remove them. There's nothing inside."

"Let's see. Do you have a crowbar or something?"

As Molly and Sarah watched with fascination, Leopold pried the top off one of the barrels. It was empty. "Satisfied now?" Mark asked.

"No. There are still five more to open."

He found what he sought in the third barrel. At first they appeared to be rolled-up scrolls, and even Molly asked, "What is it?"

"I think . . ." Leopold carefully unrolled one, revealing a painting of a ballet class. A second one seemed to show a wheat field at sunrise. "Yes. Pauline told me today that Southby's parents supposedly brought some valuable paintings with them when they fled from the Nazis. He was still searching for them. I believe that was why he tried to buy the winery back from you. The bank forced him to sell the winery and after it was gone he came across something—perhaps a letter or diary—that revealed the hiding place of the paintings."

"Does that tell us who poisoned him?" Mark asked.

"I think so. Let's look at the rest of these paintings and go back over to your house. I'll explain it all there."

The paintings were carefully removed from the barrel and counted. There were eight in all, and the other barrels proved to be empty. They carefully carried them over to the house. "These could be worth millions," Sarah speculated. "But if they were stolen from a museum or something we'd have to return them."

"More likely they belonged to Southby's parents," Mark told her. "But they're still not ours if he left any heirs."

Molly was more interested in the mystery at hand. "Tell us who poisoned him," she insisted.

"Very well," Leopold said. "You'll remember he asked again last night about buying the place, and even seemed to settle for buying those old barrels. When you turned him down again, Mark, he decided he had to kill you."

"Southby?"

Leopold nodded. "He'd brought a vial of poison with him for just that purpose."

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"You can't know that," Molly argued.

"Yes, I can. You told me, Mark, that Southby asked you to invite Pauline Fitzgerald, too. But he had to know what you were serving because Pauline didn't eat meat. That wasn't true. She had a burger with me for lunch today, and said she'd gone to the same place with Southby last week. Why had he said she was a vegetarian? It could only have been to find out what you were serving for dinner. According to Ambrose, the poison was arsenic, dissolved in white wine, so it went well with the fish course. He must have known there'd be no chance to poison your glass, Mark, without anyone seeing him, but he found an excuse to visit the kitchen and add it to the wine sauce on one of the plates. He couldn't keep that vial in his pocket so he stuck it in a space between the stove and counter."

"Anyone might have done that," Molly argued.

"But they wouldn't have left it there to be discovered later by the police. They would have removed it, ground it up, dropped it in the rubbish, anything! Why was it still there for the police to find? It could only have been because the poisoner could not retrieve it. Only Southby couldn't retrieve it, because he was dying."

Mark frowned. "But he wouldn't have poisoned himself."

"Certainly not deliberately. But with eight plates, and four people carrying them, he simply got confused. When he felt the first terrible cramps he must have realized what had happened, but he could hardly admit what he'd done. He had to hope the dose would be non-fatal."

"If I had died—"

"If you had died, he assumed Sarah would sell the place to him, or at least sell those barrels. That was all he really needed."

They heard the throbbing roar as the helicopter took off, and Sergeant Ambrose came in to see them. "Jerry Wax will be held overnight for arraignment in the morning. Then he'll probably be released on bail."

"Tell him what you just told us," Mark said to Leopold.

He went through it all again for the sergeant, and they showed him the newly discovered paintings. "We might be able to confirm it," Ambrose said. "They lifted a partial print from that vial. I was going to have to fingerprint all of you. But couldn't the mistake have been made at the table?"

Leopold shook his head. "Southby carried in the plate for Mark himself, and it was two seats away from his plate. Once the plates were on the table they couldn't have been moved without attracting attention."

Ambrose nodded. "I'll call you within an hour about that print. You'd better let me take these paintings, too, until we establish ownership. I'll give you a receipt."

They waited up over an hour for his call, but when it came the

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news was good. The partial print on the poison vial belonged to Wade Southby.

Leopold rose early in the morning, and told Mark they'd be heading home after breakfast. "We've already stayed a night longer than planned. Molly was supposed to be back in her office this morning."

"I can't thank you enough," Mark said. "I don't know what we'd have done without you."

"I'd do anything for Molly's brother."

Sarah came down with Molly to join them for breakfast. Afterward she suggested that Mark bring down their bags while she gave Leopold a final tour of the vineyard. "They're finishing the harvest today. It's a good year. We'll send you a case when it's ready."

They walked among the rows of vines and Leopold said, "It's a beautiful place you have here."

"It is that." She stopped and turned to him. "I just wanted to thank you. For everything."

"What—?"

"I could see it in your face last night."

"Yes." He stared out at the lake, following the progress of a small boat. "You saw Southby poison your husband's fish, so you switched the plates."

"How did you know?"

"A man like Southby doesn't get confused, not when he's committing murder. The poisoned fish was on Mark's plate when he carried it into the dining room. You and Suzie and I were the only ones in the kitchen with him when he must have poured that poison over the sauce. Only you or Suzie could have seen him do it." He turned back to face her. "It seemed no one could have switched the plates when we were all at the table, but then I remembered the helicopter just before we started eating. We all ran out on the back porch to see it. Suzie was one of the first out, so she couldn't have switched plates. It had to be you. Only you had both the knowledge of the poisoning and the opportunity to switch plates."

"I didn't know it was poison, then. I didn't know what it was. I just knew I didn't want my husband eating that fish. When Southby got so deathly ill I was horrified at what I'd done." She lowered her eyes. "Will you have to tell Ambrose?"

"I'm the jury," he said, "to paraphrase the title of an old novel. And the jury just found you not guilty."

"Thank you again, for Mark and Megan. And for myself."

Leopold heard Molly calling to him from back at the house. It was time to head home. "Goodbye, Sarah. I hope we see you again soon. Give Megan a hug for us."

She smiled at him. "We'll send you that case of wine." ●

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CIGARETTES

by Michael Z. Lewin

I should stop smoking. I'm sure I should. I know I should. Smoking is bad. And it can lead to bad things.

On the other hand, there *is* a good side to smoking, especially these days. It's a social thing. And that's it. Smoking is social, and I don't just mean lighting up and sharing a cig after you-know-what.

Smoking has always been social, associated with parties, drinking, fun. But these days there's a new dimension. I'm talking about the way all us smokers gather in doorways outside office buildings and factories, the places where we're sent now we're banned from the insides. So those of us who persist, who resist, who continue, we're all bound to bond. When you're huddling together from the cold, you make friends.

And together we have common cause to complain. Fat people aren't sent out to eat. Idiots don't have to go make their dumb mistakes in the rain. Parents aren't sent to the bike shed with the bore-the-knickers-off-you pictures of their bloody children. I've known people who *pretended* to be smokers just to get away from all that.

Yeah, we're social on the doorstep, in ways the people left inside just aren't. That's what I find. I mean, I haven't done, like, the kind of research you read about in the papers, but it's my experience, and I'm not special or different, I'm just ordinary. So I bet it's true.

There's other things that follow from us being on the doorsteps. I mean, we're out there at times when before everybody—us included—was inside. I won't go so far as to say I think we're healthier than our work mates because of the fresh air we get, but

Most of author Michael Z. Lewin's twenty-odd books are set in Indianapolis, where he grew up, and feature either police detective Leroy Powder or private eye Albert Samson. But since 1971 the author has lived in England, and a few years ago he decided to create a series set in his adopted country and in the town in which he currently lives, Bath. *EQMM* will have a story in that series, about a family P.I. business employing three generations, later this year. †

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if some clever clogs did research that said so, it wouldn't knock me down with a feather. And another thing is we see things that didn't used to get seen, you know? We're bound to, aren't we? Being as how we're out there looking around when nobody used to. So that's the thing with smoking—there's cons, but there's also pros.

I work at Evening Eye, a fair-size factory for the Marston Trading Estate—we have thirty-eight of us on the production side. I don't know what Evening Eye made when Jake, the owner, first picked the name. That was back when the factory was in the town center, and before my time. But you have to be flexible to keep a business above water these days, what with the market ups and downs and all the new technological stuff. You have to be ready to respond to the market. Jake says so, and it makes sense. Whatever he made back then, now we make handbags. Not lumpy, everyday bags a housewife will chuck all and sundry into. We're upmarket, us. We make evening accessories for the posh and famous. Not Posh herself yet, but lots of other rich people, some of them so posh I've never even heard of them.

Our bags are finest quality, made from the best materials. A third of our output is filling special orders, but we do bread-and-butter top gear, too, sold in high-tone catalogues and in places like Harrods. Not *like* Harrods. *In* Harrods. Well, you know what I mean.

All of it, even the catalogue stuff, is handcrafted. It sells for a bomb. We're in the haute fashion industry, so it ought to.

Evie says back when we were in town Jake didn't let us smoke on the factory floor either, because of the combustibility of stuff like the silks and velvets. But back then you could smoke in the canteen, no problem. Out here he doesn't even have a canteen. A sandwich wagon parks down the street every day in front of the double-glazing place. If you don't bring your own, that's where you get your grub. Unless you're one of them that goes off-site for lunch every day. I say them, but I mean only the one who does that on a regular basis, from the thirty-eight of us on the floor.

Evie says Jake moved the business during really hard years when lots of companies were going under. He survived by selling the town site, moving to the unit in the trading estate, and using the cash difference to retool. Committed to Evening Eye, is Jake. It's his life and soul, anybody can see that. It doesn't make him likable, but we respect him for it. And the business is still here, even if the thirty-eight of us used to be ninety-six of us when he was in town, according to Evie.

Evie used to be a smoker, like me. She tried to stop half a dozen times, and then all of a sudden it worked. She doesn't know why. There aren't nearly so many smokers now as there used to be, only three now, among the thirty-eight. But we three nowadays get together on the doorstep with the mattress makers from across

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the road and the double-glazing people and the carpets man and the something-to-do-with-cars people. All the smokers of this section of the estate smoke together. And we have a good laugh. As I said, in some ways it's more social than it's ever been.

Which is just as well, because back inside, at work, it's less social than it used to be. Jake has never been an easygoing guy, but now he's being Monster Boss. That's because he's discovered that somebody's nicking.

What's missing is from our catalogue bags. I don't have the list of what's gone, but I've seen Jake wave it around. It seems the thieving began when he went on holiday last June. That's four—no, I tell a lie—that's three and a half months ago. Not many bags—we don't mass produce them—but enough to notice, obviously. Not enough to make a serious dent in profits, but enough to make a serious dent in Jake's mood. He's been on a rampage all week. Eight days—eight work days—since he discovered it.

Now, this week, he's put in a new policy. Each day when we leave work we're all going to be searched. Someone will look in our bags—a bit ironic, that—and even check our persons. Evie's in charge. She's been around so long, Jake trusts her.

Not all the girls do, mind. "Who's going to search Evie?" one of them asked when Jake announced the new policy last Friday so we'd have the weekend to think about it. But she didn't ask very loud and Jake didn't answer. That was Sandra who asked. Bit of a rebel, Sandra. She's one of the ones they suspect, I think.

I don't mind if Evie searches me. She can pat me down all she likes, so long as she doesn't tickle.

Sandra is not the number-one suspect, though. The girls have another prime candidate. Linda. And the reason is that Linda is the one who goes off-site for lunch every day. Well, almost every day. You can tell ahead which days, because ahead of time—when we break for elevenses—Linda calls for a cab.

Yep, a cab. You see her make the call on her mobile. And then you see the cab pull up at one. And then a couple of minutes to two she's back—by cab again. Where does she go? some ask. How can she afford it? most ask.

Especially now. Now somebody's nicking.

They also don't like Linda much because she isn't social. She's not a smoker—that goes without saying—but she doesn't mix much over coffees and teas, either. Keeps herself to herself. Hasn't been here all that long. All Evie knows about her is that she's married to a Tarmac layer and they have a kiddy at school. Even when she doesn't go off on her taxi ride at lunchtime she doesn't hang out with the girls. Keeps herself to herself. Reads. Books. Well, no wonder they're suspicious of her.

I reckon—though Evie's never said—I reckon that the whole

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search thing at the end of the day is just a way to justify searching Linda's bag—and her person, if necessary. I think they have to search everybody in order to search the one they suspect.

Poor cow, Linda, I don't think she even knows they suspect her. She does her job, keeps herself to herself, thinks she's all right. Lost in her own world. Doesn't notice anything she doesn't have to notice—you know the type. She's not *social.* If you're social, you're interested in what your work mates are up to. Okay, maybe not to the extent of keeping track of every new tooth of every baby in every family—especially if you're not lumbered with kids yourself and have no bloody plans to be. Gee, who could I be describing here?

And I also think that Jake and Evie figure that even if they don't catch anybody *in flagrante delicto,* at least the searches will put an end to the nicking.

I'm sure Jake would sorely love to catch somebody—I know men like Jake. Well, he's a man, so he's like the others, isn't he? He hates the idea that somebody's putting something over on him. He *says* it's because he thinks of us as one big family at Evening Eye. He *says* anybody robbing him is robbing us all. But the truth is, he doesn't like some woman—because it's all women here, except for him—he doesn't like the idea of some woman cocking two fingers at him.

They're all the same, these guys. Guys in charge of women. I ought to know. I've known enough.

And I know something else. Jake is not going to catch Linda out. He can wait all day to pounce, search her big pouchy bag and her bouncy bra. Even look inside one of her books to see if the pages have been carved out.

Do you know why?

It's because what they think is the evidence against her isn't. They ask, How can she afford all those cabs? She must go off in the taxi three, four times a week, and then back again. Who on earth at Evening Eye has money for that? And if she does, where does she get it from?

I wouldn't put it past Jake to follow Linda around out of hours, to try to find where she sells the bags she supposedly nicks. Try to catch her going to a market and approaching a fashion trader who'll give her a tenth what they retail for in Harrods, and she'll be grateful for it.

But he can follow her all day and all night.

If he wants to know about Linda, what he ought to do is take up smoking. He ought to come out on the doorstep where I go and see what I see while I'm out there.

I told you, smokers these days, we see things that other people don't. If Jake was to come out with me on the doorstep, and pay attention, he'd see Linda come out three or four times a week to her waiting taxi. And he'd see her arrive back at work at two min-

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utes to two. Regular as clockwork.

But what he'd also see is that it's always the same taxi. Linda's shagging the taxi driver. Obvious. To anybody who cares to look. If any money's changing hands, it isn't coming out of Linda's purse. That's what Jake would see if he came out to socialize with the smokers.

But I very much hope he doesn't. If he was to start hanging out with us smokers it would put a serious cramp in my style. That's because it's me who is taking the occasional bag, and passing it over to Molly from the double-glazing at break times for her to sell to her mate on the market.

She gets a tenth what they sell for in Harrods. So I get a twentieth. But that's fine with me. Every little bit helps. Not least because they're bloody expensive these days, cigarettes. ●

Final Escape

by Dennis Richard Murphy

Muffled men in rubber boots are digging late at night.
They grunt with every pound of earth they shovel from the site.
In dark cloth coats and baseball caps, considerate of death,
Their flashlights cut the misty air and backlight puffs of breath.

The stillness of the early hour makes loud the sounds of men.
By shovelfuls the pile grows higher: "They buried deep back then."
Now deeper dug and panting more, no one no longer talks
When flashlights freeze and breath is held as someone hits a box.

Renewed, they dig around the sides and bring the thing to view,
A fiberglass sarcophagus, the handles rusted through.
"A plastic job, the rage back then," says one who seems to know.
"No dust leaks out, no worms get in; it makes the process slow."

From far above a winch comes down to soiled sweating men
Who take the weight and slip the straps beneath the coffin's ends.
Then out they climb, the webbing strains, the windlass motor hums.
A moment stopped: "It's stuck," says one, then up the long box comes.

Beside its pit the coffin sits, still stained from years below.
It seems, at misty thickened dawn, to cast a ghastly glow.
No one speaks but all move up, each elbowing for view.
A small man with a piece of steel busts out the rusted screws.

The flashlights pan the bones and dust, the tie clasp and the threads.
Unseen, unheard, a wraith escapes, and screams above their heads.

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Art by Jason C. Eckhardt

A Way With Horses

by Therese Greenwood

Sheldon Blacklock had been sitting on top of the hay wagon for a good half-hour. It gave him the best view across the St. Lawrence River to the American town on the opposite shore and he saw Kit the instant she strolled across the main street and onto the big dock at Telegraph Point. Even with the quarter-mile of busy shipping channel between them, boats rushing across the border with lumber and grain and people, he was sure it was Kit. There wasn't another woman for a hundred miles who wore a red dress on a Tuesday afternoon. Kit didn't save colors for Saturday nights, she adorned her big curves with reds and purples and yellows like a crazy painting Sheldon had seen in a lawyer's office in town. She would be extra dolled up today because of their plan, the rest of her beads and frippery packed for Syracuse and points south.

The furthest south Sheldon had ever been was the town he was looking at, Cape Vincent, New York, with its frame houses and hay dealers and grocers who could tell you the day the town got electric lights. His earliest memory was of standing here on Horne's Point, the southernmost tip of the big Canadian island around which Lake Ontario spilled into the St. Lawrence River. Even then he

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dreamed of leaving the island for New York, Philadelphia, Boston, and Miami, cities he read about in dime novels, where Prohibition made life even faster and things went on day and night. Where he was heading now that Kit had waved the go-ahead signal with one brash move, not repeated because she was sure he was looking. The sun glinted on her silver compact as she turned away to powder her nose.

"Put your eyes back in your head," said Maddy. He had been looking at Kit so hard he scarcely heard his sister-in-law and his brother Everett pull up the buggy at the end of the island's longest road.

Therese Greenwood grew up on Wolfe Island, Ontario, the largest of the Thousand Islands, where her family has lived since 1812. The region forms the backdrop for her historical crime fiction, including "Fair Lady," a finalist for the Crime Writers of Canada's 1999 Arthur Ellis Award for best short story. She has a masters degree in journalism and has worked as a newspaper reporter, editor, and broadcaster. ❡

"Just admiring the view," said Sheldon, sliding from the top of the wagon, careful not to dislodge the well-packed bales. He was careful, too, of the loaded pistol in his jacket pocket, the one the man from Ogdensburg had given him the day they shot forty-two mallards.

"I know what you're admiring," said Maddy, "and I don't know what you see in it." She thought Kit was Jezebel, Salome, and Gloria Swanson rolled into one. All the island, even Everett, thought the same, but she was the only one who would say it. To think he had been half in love with Maddy, a slip of a thing with snapping blue eyes and a sharp tongue. He and Everett had taken turns dancing with her to Katie Greenwood's victrola and partnering her at the euchre games at the church hall. Then Sheldon started guiding the Americans who came north looking for small-mouth bass and pike in the summer and Canada geese and wood duck in the fall. The hunters woke with a shot of whiskey and spent the day polishing off as much drink as wildlife and talking about the three things that mattered: guns, women, and whiskey. The Canadian sidewalks rolled up early and at night Sheldon ferried the Americans back to the Cape for poker and corn liquor, and he met Kit at The Anchor. She was nothing like Maddy. She had brass and laughed like a man while she matched him shot for shot of Jack Daniels, then used quick, wide slashes to replace her bright red Luxor lip pomade. Sheldon smuggled her bottles of Corby's rye and Kit would laugh her man laugh and say she went for the strong Canadian stuff. Everybody knew she didn't mean booze.

"When are you going to grow up, Sheldon?" Maddy scolded, the palm of her hand cupped over the swell of her belly where her first

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baby was growing. It was fine for his brother to settle down at twenty years of age, fenced in with a churchgoing wife and baby and thirty acres of passable pasture. Everett didn't have the mind's eye for anything bigger than an island eleven miles long. But Sheldon wouldn't say that out loud, not in front of his brother.

"Shel, you should've waited for me to load the wagon," said Everett, handing Maddy the lines and jumping off the bench seat, landing lightly on the balls of his feet. To do business in the Cape he wore his Sunday suit, the one Maddy handmade for him, even the tie, and his thick black hair was slicked down, making him look like a kid off to Sunday school.

"I needed to get moving," said Sheldon. He'd loaded the big wagon before the crack of dawn and maybe he'd hitched the team too early, for the horses had picked up on his nerves and were fidgeting in the traces.

"We ought to make two trips, take the team and then the wagon," said Everett, giving the horses a once-over, running his hands along the harness, careful not to get horse snot on his clothes. "Tony's a little frisky."

"That colt is as green as a grasshopper," snapped Maddy. Tony was only broke to harness on the island, where there were no stoplights or trains and only a dozen cars, all of which pulled over if they saw Blacklock's green colt. But the big problem was the middle of the river and Maddy knew it. "If Tony gets spooked on the barge, he'll take the wagon, the old mare, and everything else straight to the bottom." Kit would have said straight to hell.

"Now, Maddy, you know Ev can handle any horse," said Sheldon, surprised to hear pride in his voice. "He's like those cowboys in the pictures at the Bijou, who get horses to drag them out of quicksand. Anyways, we don't have time for two trips. The train will be at the station in half an hour and we got to load up before it pulls out."

"We best get going," said Everett, cutting off Maddy's next remark by reaching both hands for the wax-paper-wrapped sandwich she was holding. As he took it, he held her hand a little longer than necessary and gave it a squeeze. Sheldon had never seen them touch, not since they kissed at the altar, and he felt ashamed of noticing.

"I made enough for you, too, Sheldon," Maddy said, still looking at his brother. "Everett would share his with you anyway." Then she flicked the lines over the pony's back and turned back down the road. "Watch yourselves," she called out over her shoulder.

"A lot of fuss over a ten-minute barge ride," Sheldon grumbled.

"What can go wrong?" Everett asked as he leapt onto the wagon's bench seat, the hay towering over him. Of course, he didn't know the hay was piled two bales thick around ten thousand dollars' worth of Corby's whiskey. He didn't know, either, that smuggling the whiskey to the States was where he came in. Everett really was like those movie cowboys. He never took a drop of liquor, never missed

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church on Sunday, had never uttered a swearword in his life. Even now, with Pa dead almost six months and no one to live up to anymore, Everett was a rootin'-tootin' good guy. And he was never, ever searched by the excise men on the other side of the river.

Everett drove the team down the cement incline of the boat ramp with a touch on the lines, calling something Sheldon couldn't hear. The barge was smallish, just a half-foot bigger around than the wagon and team, and Tony twitched in the tight space until Everett gave the lines another touch and spoke again.

Sheldon climbed aboard and started the motor, the one from the old Chevy truck engine, and it put-putted away as he eased them out into the channel. The wind was up and there was a bit of chop—the water always ran faster on this side of the island—but things went smooth enough for the first hundred yards, until the American patrol boat came up out of nowhere.

They called it a six-bitter, for the half-dozen machine guns mounted along its 75-foot sides. They didn't even count the one-pound, rapid-fire gun that swivelled to fire in any direction. Sheldon counted it, though; he counted the patrol boat a floating nightmare. Grey as fog and built for the ocean, it had come up the river hunting bootleggers from Detroit and Chicago, the big-time gangsters stealing up from the Great Lakes. Sheldon supposed the gun power must be working, because lately he hadn't seen any out-of-town thugs in the speakeasies on the wrong side of the Cape's railway tracks.

But would they turn that gun power on him? The barge was still on the Canadian side of the river, and if Sheldon turned back now the patrol boat couldn't follow, not legally. He looked back at Everett, who was keeping an eye on the wake the American boat churned up. Then Sheldon looked ahead to Kit, still standing on the point, and she waved with both arms, urging him to her. If he turned back, the G-men would know something was up and he wouldn't get another chance at a stake that would take Kit out of the town too small to hold her.

As the barge sliced across the invisible border, the patrol boat changed course towards them and someone on the bridge gave Sheldon the sign to cut his engine. He threw the switch and the barge pitched in the boat's wake. Everett sang out in his soothing voice, but Tony snorted and jerked, lifting one big hoof after another, rocking the wagon back and forth so that one of the top bales tumbled off and into the water. The splash spooked Tony and it spooked Sheldon, too, because that left only one bale between the whiskey and the patrol boat. He put his hand in his jacket pocket and felt the pistol grip, cold as a stone.

Everett slipped off the wagon seat and made his way to the front of the barge, graceful as a girl as he sidestepped the stamping hooves. Everett was a small man, although Sheldon seldom thought of him that way. He didn't think of himself as small, and

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he and Everett were much of a size, thin and wiry with almost dainty features. Everett looked even smaller as he took off his jacket, his shirt white as snow, the billowy sleeves held up by garters on his forearms. He wrapped the coat around Tony's eyes. Maddy would give him hell.

"Everett Blacklock, as I live and breathe," said a voice from the patrol boat. Sheldon shielded his eyes with his palm and looked up into the sun, recognizing one of the Cape Vincent excise men.

"How've you been keeping?" said Everett in his calm, smooth voice, one hand stroking the colt's neck.

Sheldon silently cursed his brother's obliging nature and tightened his hold on the gun. His palms were sweaty, the pistol grip had gone damp, and he wondered if he had the nerve to shoot his way out.

"Fair to middling," said the excise man. "Yourself?"

"Never better," said Everett. The horse jerked his head up hard and would have smashed Everett in the chin if he hadn't stepped aside in time.

Sheldon wondered how far he would make it if he jumped into the lake and swam for Canadian water. Maybe they wouldn't go too hard on Everett. The worst they would give him was three years, if he got a wet judge.

"Everett Blacklock is the most honest man in two counties." The excise man turned to the ship's captain, who took his hand from the sidearm strapped to his hip and looked a tad disappointed. "We'd best let him get on about his business."

"Be seeing you," said Everett politely, waving with one hand, still stroking the horse's neck with the other.

The patrol boat pulled away slowly, taking care not to throw up much backwash. Everett kept Tony blindfolded and the horse stayed more or less calm as Sheldon started the motor. They didn't have far to go, and Sheldon's heart almost stopped racing by the time they docked at the wharf where Kit stood waiting, hands on her hips.

"My sweet Lord, Shellie," she called as he cut the engine and aimed the barge plumb at the boat ramp. No one else called him Shellie, but it didn't sound small from her. "When those G-men pulled up next to you I just about had kittens."

"Friends of Everett," he said, tossing her the tie rope.

"Everett has a friendly side?" sassed Kit, wrapping the rope around the cleat and giving him a bold view down the front of her dress. He stepped off the barge and she jumped into his arms, wrapping her arms and legs around him and kissing him till her lipstick was all over his cheek. Now Everett would see how a woman showed a man she loved him. But when a breathless Sheldon turned around, Everett was going about his business, leading the team off the barge and through the customs check, the excise men waving him past.

"There goes Mr. Friendly," Kit said, her bosom still heaving.

Everett didn't speak a word to Kit when Sheldon handed her

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into the wagon and climbed up after her. Kit stuck close as a whisper to Sheldon, touching him, sighing in his ear, rubbing against him, while a silent Everett drove up the empty street to the Rome-Watertown line. Sheldon was preoccupied, partly with Kit's carrying on and partly wondering what his brother would do when he saw the real goods. Maybe Everett would keep looking away, the way he did when Kit put her hand up high on Sheldon's thigh. But he never found out what Everett would have done because they no sooner pulled up the wagon than the man with the Tommy gun stepped out between the horses and the train tracks.

"Hand 'er over, hayseed," said the Tommy gun.

Sheldon had seen him at the Anchor once or twice, a big operator from Detroit with a silk suit and a loud city tie. Sheldon slid his hand down behind Kit's back and slipped it into his jacket pocket. He couldn't make a move, though, not with Kit in the line of fire.

"I expect he's after that whiskey you hid inside the bales," said Everett.

Sheldon didn't register it then, that Everett knew all along; he was still wondering how the gangster had cottoned on to it.

"You'd better hand it over, Shellie," said Kit. "He means business."

Everett left the lines on the seat and carefully slid to the ground, taking a cautious step back from the wagon. Sheldon turned to Kit, thinking to get her off the wagon fast and out of harm's way before he made his stand.

"Sorry, Shellie." She took out her compact and looked at herself in the mirror, dabbing lip pomade against her full bottom lip with her little finger. "I'm staying for the ride."

"You stupid bumpkin," said the Tommy gun. "What's a woman like that going to do with a yokel like you?"

"Kit?" Sheldon didn't like the question in his voice, but he couldn't help it, it gasped out of the hole opening up in his gut.

Kit laughed her man laugh, the one he thought so fine. She smacked her lips, looked in the compact mirror, and said, "You screwed your own brother, Shellie, now which one of us is worse?"

She was right. That's what Sheldon thought when he pulled out the gun and pointed it between her red lips. She gave him a surprised smile, her eyebrows raised.

"I wouldn't," said Tommy-gun, "unless you want me to blow your brother's head off."

In the dime novels they called it a Mexican standoff, but it didn't feel like they described it. Sheldon's gaze wasn't steely, his hands shook like a butter churn, and for a nasty moment he thought he would wet himself. It felt like his life went by in a lazy swish of Tony's tail, guns pointed at the only two people he had loved, and then the train whistle sounded.

"Train's coming," said Everett in the soft voice he used with horses.

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Sheldon felt his grip on the gun loosen and he turned from Kit to toss it to the ground. Then he slid off the wagon, but he didn't step back like his brother. Instead, he looked up at Kit one last time as she snapped her compact shut, tossed it in her bag, and shimmied over to let Tommy-gun hop up next to her.

"Nothing personal, Shellie," said Kit, putting her hand high on the inside of Tommy-gun's thigh.

"The train," began Everett, but Sheldon drew back his hand and slapped Tony hard on the rump, sending the team off at a good clip across the tracks. Tommy-gun reached forward to collect the trailing lines and Everett took a few steps forward, calling something after them, his voice lost in the sound of the train.

They used to call trains iron horses, that went through Sheldon's mind as it happened. He could never picture the crash, exactly how it looked as Tony bolted and overturned the wagon on the tracks. He only remembered the sound, the crunching, grinding mess of steel hitting bone and wood and whiskey. It was so loud he never heard Kit scream. Maybe she never had time. But he could hear a horse screaming, people yelling, the steam engine hissing, and the bells of the fire engine as it raced up the street even though there was no fire.

A single bottle of whiskey rolled to a stop at Sheldon's feet, somehow unbroken, a little miracle. He uncorked it and tipped the neck high over his head so the liquor burned straight down his throat. When he lowered the bottle Everett was picking up the pistol and checking the load in the chamber, flicking it shut with a sideways flick, like a cowboy. Sheldon took another swig of whiskey and Everett reached out a hand that held the soft linen handkerchief Maddy had sewn.

"You got lipstick on your face," Everett said.

Sheldon took another slug of the Corby's and Everett put the hanky back in his pocket and turned to the wreck. Sheldon had never seen Everett with a pistol, but he seemed to know the gun, holding it loosely at his side as he knelt beside Tony, dodging the sharp, flashing hooves and stroking the straining neck for a last second. The single shot went straight into the horse's brain and there was a little less noise.

The horse's blood marked the front of Everett's coat in a stain so deep Maddy would never get it out. He dabbed at it with his handkerchief as he headed to the dock, holding the gun like a hammer and passing Sheldon with no more of a look than he would give a fence post. When Everett reached Telegraph Point he pulled back his arm and, in the only angry gesture Sheldon had seen his brother make, hurled the pistol into deep water.

Sheldon drained the last of the whiskey, the marks of the woman's lips still on his face, as he watched his brother cross the river home. ●

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A TALK WITH GAVIN POLONE

by Steven E. Steinbock

Talent-agent-turned-producer Gavin Polone has earned a reputation around Hollywood as someone who pulls no punches. Known for brinkmanship and honesty, he even named one of his production companies "Pariah Productions." Along with partner Judy Hofflund, he was responsible for the films 8MM, Drop Dead Gorgeous, Stir of Echoes, and Panic Room (the latter two directed by David Koepp, who wrote and directed Secret Window). On the small screen, Polone produced Curb Your Enthusiasm, The Gilmore Girls, and the FX Network program American P.I. He is currently in pre-production on a real-time thriller entitled Tick-Tock, about an amnesiac trying to find a time bomb. Polone took time to chat with us about his recent production Secret Window, just out on DVD, a film that features Johnny Depp as a writer trying to find an issue of EQMM.

EQMM: What attracted you to *Secret Window?* How did you come to be its producer?

POLONE: Matt Tolmac [vice president of Production] at Columbia Pictures bought the property, and thought that it would be a great thing for David Koepp to adapt and direct. And I had a long-term relationship with both Dave and Columbia, so they thought maybe Dave and I would want to do it together, because we work well together. And it sort of went from there.

EQMM: I'm not sure that most film viewers really understand what a producer does. How much of your job involves the business, budget, and bankrolling?

POLONE: It's different in every project. I have a movie out right now where we financed the whole movie and did everything. When you do a movie for Sony, they put up all the money. But there is still a lot that you're involved in in terms of the budgeting, and also putting all the elements together, hiring people (line producers), figuring out where you're going to shoot it, and working with the director, trying to make the best movie with whatever budgetary constraints you have.

EQMM: Was this the first time you did a project involving Stephen King?

POLONE: Yes, it was.

EQMM: How did that go?

POLONE: I never spoke to him. The person who really talked to him was Dave, and everything I heard was from Dave and everything went really smoothly.

EQMM: How do you think the adaptation process went?

POLONE: Just fantastic. I also did this with Dave on *Stir of Echoes.* I've known him for eighteen years, and he's the best screenwriter there is. So ultimately I had high expectations. I really loved the novella, and Dave and I talked about it beforehand, and I thought his adaptation was right on the money. **Continued on page 203**

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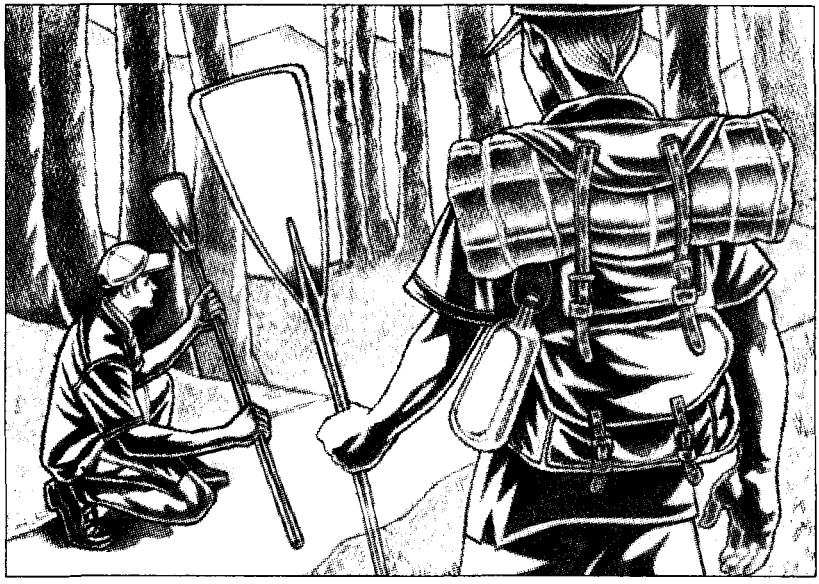

Art by Daniel Galanaugh

PACK ANIMALS

by Peter Sellers

"I'd stay back from them dogs if I was you," Nick said.

It was obvious that this was the only sensible course of action, the huskies snarling and yelping at the ends of their chains, lips drawn back, teeth sharp and long. But Doug wasn't known for doing what was sensible. He'd been the first to see the pack, each dog tethered outside its wooden house about fifty yards back of Nick's cabin. With a cry of "Puppies!" Doug had run along the path to the animals, and they'd surged out to meet him, stopping only when their chains pulled them up short.

"They're like wolves," I said.

Nick nodded. "Sled dogs, boy. They ain't pets. They do what I tell 'em cause they're scared of me. The wife can calm 'em, and my daughter some. But any of us was standing in among 'em and fell down, well now . . ." He spat on the mossy ground. ". . . you could use what's left to bait a hook." Then he walked back to the cabin, leaving Doug, Ian, Jerry, and me watching the dogs warily. Rick, who was scared of dogs, looked on from farther back.

Nick's cabin was on a piece of land carved out from the endless

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forest of jack pine, spruce, and fir at the point where the Moose and Abitibi Rivers merged. From there the Moose flowed on alone, quickening past Moosonee and Moose Factory until it emptied into James Bay. Moosonee was where we were heading, on a two-week canoe trip that was the greatest adventure we'd had in our short lives. Seven of us were school kids, aged thirteen, like Jerry and me, to sixteen, like Doug and Rick, with whom I shared both canoe and tent. The other two were teachers, both keen and seasoned canoeists, who brought students out each summer for a wilderness education. Mr. Walker organized and led the trips, and Mr. Bishop, whom everyone called Bish, was second in command.

A past *EQMM* Readers Award winner, Peter Sellers returns this month with a tale based on a Cochrane to Moosonee canoe trip he took himself at age thirteen. Some of the story's incidents are based on events that really happened, he told *EQMM*, and he has evoked the Canadian wilderness with a vividness that bespeaks experience there. Mr. Sellers has worked as an editor of mystery anthologies and has many published stories to his credit. ✝

When I think back on it now, it seems unlikely that parents would let their children do such a thing these days. It was different back in 1970, long before cell phones and GPS. We set off without a life jacket among us. Nobody's parents seemed to mind. They were told where we were going and when we'd be back, and that was that. We'd go days without seeing another person. There was nothing but the forest, so dense that you knew it'd take you only a few minutes to get lost for good.

The food was mostly freeze-dried because packets were easier to lug on portage than cans. The stuff tasted awful, though, and I imagine everybody was as hungry as I was most of the time.

There were a few tins. Mr. Walker would pack Irish stew as a special treat, and there'd be a couple of cans of syrup, doled out sparingly on pancakes. And there was always tinned ham.

Once, a bad storm blew up and kept us stuck in our tents for twenty-four hours. We huddled inside listening to the rain and the flapping canvas. There was no way to cook, so Mr. Walker gave each of the three tents a tinned ham and a tinned pound cake. I never could stand tinned ham with the slimy jelly that covered it. No matter how hungry I was, I wouldn't eat that. I auctioned my share off, Doug paying me a quarter for it, and I survived the day on my piece of pound cake. I was glad to have the money because every so often we came across a fly-in fishing camp and we stocked up on candy then, dipping into the small amount of tuck

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money that each of us was allowed. An extra twenty-five cents offered increased possibilities. I didn't want to be caught short when we got to Moosonee, either, where we could eat what we wanted. Everybody must have had the same images in their minds: feasts of hamburgers, French fries, milkshakes, and chocolate bars.

Cash aside, the whole storm episode was thrilling. We talked about the Maple Leafs and the Argonauts, speculated about girls—although Doug did so with the conviction that spoke of applied knowledge—and shared ghost stories and dirty jokes that I laughed at, although I didn't always understand. Besieged by the lightning and thunder and the determined wind, we were united by the heady blend of the knowledge that disaster could strike at any second and the certainty that all would be fine. Good as the storm was, though, it wasn't a patch on the bears.

We came upon a wide expanse of beach with a narrow inlet to the north. Most of the rest of the way along the river the forest crowded close to the shore. But at this one spot the trees thinned out and someone, probably Mr. Walker, who was always pointing out things that no one else had seen, noticed a large black bear on the side of the inlet farthest from the sand. Quietly the word spread, and we stopped paddling and watched as the bear dropped into the inlet and swam across to the beach. Only when it had climbed out, then walked back in the water and returned to its original place, did I notice two cubs huddled on the north side on the inlet, bending over the water, poised to jump in. The mother was obviously showing them how. I don't know if anyone else had seen the cubs yet, but if they had they kept quiet about it. We were all silent, drifting slowly about thirty feet from shore, all paddles shipped except those of the sternsmen who used them to keep the canoes on a straight course.

Again, the mother bear jumped into the water and swam to the beach. This time one of the cubs followed. The second cub remained timidly on the far side of the inlet. It bounced back and forth in agitation. That was about the time that Doug finally noticed.

"Look!" he shouted, leaning over and causing the canoe to tip unsettlingly, "there are cubs!" He pointed at the bears. The mother, hearing the sudden noise from the river, turned and rose full up on her hind legs, roaring. This inspired the second cub, who flung himself into the water and swam madly to the beach. Together, the three bears ran for the trees. As the cubs reached the edge of the forest, the mother turned back, rose, and roared at us again. Then, with a final glare, she turned and followed her cubs into the trees.

We waited a few minutes before we beached the canoes. Everyone wanted to get a look at the footprints. We were all excited. Other than hearing moose crashing through the forest, this was the closest we'd been to any large wildlife. As we climbed ashore,

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Doug said, "Bring your paddles in case she comes back." Preposterous as that was, we did it. We stood gazing at the deep, wide prints pressed into the sand, our flimsy beaver-tail paddles clenched in our small, smooth fists.

Doug wasn't much of a canoeist, lily-dipping when Rick and I were digging in, but he was our comedian. That made up for a lot. He and Rick were as opposite as Maple Leafs and Habs fans. Rick was serious-minded, hardworking, and already clear on his path in life: medical school at the University of Toronto and then a specialty in internal medicine. The rest, Ian, Phil, Jerry, Paul, and I, were all different. Even so, it didn't take many days in the wilderness to convince us that we had to get along somehow, no matter how much we might avoid one another back home.

Doug and Rick had trouble working that out. Doug was prone to borrowing things. I found this pair of sunglasses with one lens missing and wore them for a day or so, but somehow Doug got them and he wore them and they became his. At portages, he'd find ways to switch packs with you so he got the lighter one. It went on and on, but he was funny, for all that. He could make everyone laugh, except maybe Rick, and laughing made people forget about other things.

Rick didn't laugh or joke around much. He was the best kid on the trip at handling a canoe, though. In his spare time, when the tents were pitched and dinner was cooking, Rick would take out one of the canoes and practice, working on his stroke and on getting maximum benefit from it. Sometimes we'd sit on the shore and watch him. Rick's form was lovely—smooth and seemingly effortless. Doug wouldn't watch. He'd just occasionally drift by, make a comment that got us chuckling, and go off somewhere else.

If there was tension between any of us, Mr. Walker didn't interfere. He was easygoing most of the time. Every day he'd have us take a break from the day's paddling and raft the canoes. While we drifted, Mr. Walker would smoke a pipe and talk about other trips he was planning. All of us had already been on trips along the Temagami River. The Abitibi was a step up. But Mr. Walker had higher ambitions still: a more advanced canoe trip on a mighty river like the Mackenzie or Coppermine.

In the evenings he would tell stories by the fire, usually about his tripping experiences when he was young. He wore his old bomber jacket, its leather nicked and scarred, but the sheepskin lining soft and warm. Mr. Walker called it the Breezy All-Weather, and about the greatest treat you could have on a trip, almost as great as a Dairy Milk bar, was the chance to wear the jacket for a few minutes. My turn came one evening when, after a moonlight swim, Jerry, Paul, and I had gone trembling up to the fire. He gave the jacket to each of us in turn and our trembling stopped.

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There was trembling no jacket could stop, though, after we met Nick and pitched our tents near his cabin, his family, and his pack of dogs.

Where the Moose and Abitibi converge, the current is highly determined, its only goal to sweep as quickly as possible on to James Bay. Our little flotilla came from the Abitibi and had to fight its way across the width of the Moose to the far shore. Every foot was a struggle, even with all of us paddling hard—all except Doug, who still didn't seem to be shifting enough water to move his own weight forward in a dead calm, let alone to overcome a persistent current. I was in the middle with Rick in the stern and I could feel Rick's anger without having to turn and look. We were battling the current stubbornly when a voice beside me yelled, "Ship your paddles and grab on!"

My head had been bent with the strain of pushing back the water, and I hadn't noticed the motorized freighter canoe pull up alongside. At the tiller was a bald man with a lined face. His hand, which looked like it could have held back a moose, was clamped on our gunwale. Without asking questions we did what he said, and he ferried us across the river to the calmness of shore.

He did this three times, bringing each canoe to safety. Then he drew his boat up next to Mr. Walker's. "Getting late," he called. "You got a place to camp?"

"We're about to start looking for one," Mr. Walker said.

"You can camp at my place. There's lots of room." Before Mr. Walker could answer, he turned downriver. After twenty yards he beached his canoe, and we followed. It was a steep climb up a beaten path to the clearing where his cabin stood. The clearing was surrounded by thick pine forest, with trails going off in different directions: one to the smokehouse; one to the sheds where, we were to discover later, he stored his sled, traps, and various other gear; and one to the dogs. There was a healthy woodpile, too, that implied long winters. It was while we were looking around that Doug noticed the dogs, and our rescuer spoke just in time to keep him from getting mauled.

His name was Nick Rempaul. He didn't go around and introduce himself. He just gave a quiet mention of it to Mr. Walker and Bish, along with a handshake, and must have assumed that word would spread like it will. I don't think he ever got any of our names, except maybe the teachers'. Maybe Doug's and Rick's, too, later on, but that would be guessing.

There was a woman in the cabin, which was big and surprisingly comfortable for a place so isolated. Nick was telling us that he was known to most folks along the river as Nick the Trapper. He showed us a letter that had been delivered to him from someone in the United States. Sure enough, the envelope was

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addressed to *Nick the Trapper, Abitibi River, Canada.* "Took a bit, but they got 'er to me," he said. I thought what a remarkable character he must be.

"Saw you struggling out there," he said to Mr. Walker. "You're not the first."

"No," Mr. Walker said. "I'm not surprised. That's a strong current."

Nick nodded. "She's stubborn, all right." He clapped his big hands and rubbed them together. "Since you're here and staying the night, have supper with us."

"Food ain't ready for this many guests," the woman said before Mr. Walker could answer. She was sitting in a straight-backed chair in a corner of the room, smoking and repairing snowshoes. They were handmade, at least four feet long, and strung with some kind of gut that had snapped or torn. She was working slowly and carefully, and she did not take her eyes off her work as she spoke. Nick introduced her to us as his wife Faye, and she gave each of us a long, slow look. Doug was the only one who spoke to her, giving her a loud, "Howdy." She replied with an even longer stare and a deep frown.

The offer of dinner had probably set everyone's saliva flowing, but it dried up quickly when Mr. Walker said, "That's all right. We're already imposing. We've got our supplies, and it's good for the boys to cook."

Nick nodded and didn't press, but he did add, "Well, leave some room and you can try some of my fish. There's plenty of that."

Mr. Walker said, "Thanks. I think the boys'd like that."

"Speaking of grub, I better feed them dogs." Nick got up, and as he went for the door a small posse of us followed him. This was a sight we did not want to miss.

Nick went to his smokehouse and came out with a pail full of raw meat. He walked toward the dogs and they came to the ends of their chains again, but this time whining, heads lowered. Nick reached into the pail and took out handfuls of meat—it might have been venison or moose—and tossed a piece to each dog in turn. He started with the biggest. "That's Chinook," Nick said as the dog rent and devoured the meat, keeping a watchful eye on the rest of the pack. "He's my lead dog. Never let me down yet." With the pail empty and the other dogs snarling and tearing at their meals, Nick started back to the smokehouse, talking as he moved away. "That's something you need when you're out in the wild."

"A lead dog?" I asked.

"A partner that won't let you down," Nick said.

When we got back into the cabin there was a girl sitting there. I wondered where she'd been when we arrived—perhaps outside and she'd come in through the back door. "This is my daughter,

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Rebecca," Nick said as he took his chair again and began filling a pipe.

She was a dark-haired girl who looked nineteen or twenty, although Doug told me later that she had just turned sixteen. She stood up as if she was about to walk towards us when Faye abruptly handed her a snowshoe. Rebecca started working on it, but I could tell she was not as focused on the task as her mother was.

Nick, gleeful and rich in anecdote, was talking about what it was like working a trap line. Doug wasn't listening. He had walked over and squatted next to Rebecca. I guessed they were talking about snowshoes because when I glanced over Doug had his hand on the wooden frame and was rubbing it gently. Rick was nearby, too, watching with interest.

Faye started to say something to her daughter, but all she got out was a sharp "Rebecca!" before Nick said it was time he got the fish.

Out by the tents, we had dined on Gumpert's freeze-dried mashed potatoes, freeze-dried beef Stroganoff, and freeze-dried fruit cocktail. After it was gone we were still hungry. Everyone but me was looking forward to the fish.

Nick served us deep-fried pickerel and smoked sturgeon. I didn't care much for either. Fish is not one of my favorite things. The odd tuna sandwich is okay, and fish and chips are fine, but there's a big difference between a piece of deep-fried halibut and a slab of smoky, dark-tasting sturgeon. And the pickerel was full of bones and you had to be careful eating it.

I nibbled, pretending to take bigger mouthfuls than I actually took, discreetly wrapping the uneaten fish in a serviette. All the guys were enjoying the extra food. Doug was clowning around, as usual. At one point he took a piece off Rick's plate and popped it into his mouth when no one was looking—no one except me and Rebecca, who smiled, and Faye, who didn't.

When the fish was done, we noticed that the dogs had started whining.

"What's bothering them?" Rick asked.

"Maybe there's a wolverine out there, or a cougar or something," Doug said with excitement.

Nick puffed on his pipe. "It's rain," he said.

"Pardon me?" Mr. Walker said.

"I'll show you."

He got up and put on a lined, plaid jacket and took a flashlight off a shelf near the door. It had cooled down, with a brisk wind coming from the northwest. "You can feel it coming," Nick said as he led us to the top of the path down to the river. "Dogs can smell it and it makes 'em riled."

"Why?" Mr. Walker asked.

In answer Nick switched on the flashlight and pointed the beam

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at the trunk of a tree that grew up partway down the path. There was a plaque nailed to the tree. The words engraved on it were just visible: *High water mark, May 17, 1966.*

"Is that true?" Bish asked.

"Yep. Lots of rain, lots of runoff. Flood lasted three days. Dogs spent the whole time on top of their houses, no food. Now every time it rains they get aggrieved." He turned off the flashlight as the first fat drops hit us.

"I hope that won't happen tonight," Doug said.

Nick snapped the flashlight on again suddenly, holding it under his chin, the beam pointing up. It was an old Hallowe'en trick, but it worked. The shadows cast by the crags and fissures on his face made him look scary and mean. "Well, if it does," he said, "at least there's lots to feed 'em." Then he turned the light off again and walked back to the cabin, chuckling.

When he walked, he made no noise that I could hear. I asked about that later and he said, "It's good to move quiet in the woods. When you're hunting, silence can mean the difference between eating and going hungry. Everyone who lives here learns that or they leave." He bent close to me and lowered his voice. "Or they die."

Rebecca was walking with Doug, and I heard her say, "It'll rain hard, but not for long." The dogs didn't seem to believe this. They were whining and crying like it was never going to stop. I still had the uneaten fish wrapped in paper, stuffed in my pocket. I thought it might make the dogs feel a little better. One of them, anyway. So while everyone else headed back inside, I walked through our campsite towards the doghouses. It was raining harder now, but the dogs forgot that and charged at me just as they had earlier in the day. I stopped walking in plenty of time, took the sturgeon out, and tossed it to Chinook. "There you go, boy," I said as he snatched it from the air. Since the pickerel had bones, I threw it in the river. I wasn't sure the dogs should have that and I didn't wish them any harm.

Inside, Faye had a fire going. She had shifted her chair close to it and changed the angle so she got the heat. She faced the center of the room straight on instead of looking at it out of the corner of her eye.

The room was friendly and comforting. Bish, Phil, and Ian had a game of Monopoly going at the big dining table. Jerry and Paul were playing cribbage. It was like being at a cottage or a more conventional summer camp. Mr. Walker had joined Nick in smoking a pipe, and the aroma from the two briers was pleasant, an exotic spiciness that smelt of adventure.

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Mr. Walker and Nick sat side by side in two bentwood rockers. Mr. Walker was asking the kind of questions you'd expect of a teacher. Where did Rebecca go to school? How did they get supplies in the winter? How had he seen the trapping business change over the years? I was half-listening to that conversation, enough to know that Rebecca spent her winters in town going to school but that she wasn't going back in the fall. Nick said this in a way that indicated there had been some trouble, and I wondered if it had to do with low grades or lack of interest. Doug's grades didn't tend to be great, either. From year to year he just scraped by, and maybe that was something he and Rebecca had found in common.

Nick was saying that when the river froze twelve feet deep you could trek along it if need be. He tried to do that as little as possible, preferring to rely on his own devices.

"I guess you must not mind not seeing many people most of the year," Mr. Walker was saying.

Nick laughed. "You'd be surprised how much coming and going there is through the woods. There's too much company sometimes. Other times you get starved for it."

Faye kept working, glancing at the Monopoly players, at her daughter, and at Doug. Rick was sitting by Rebecca, too. He was trying to talk with her in the serious way he had, but Doug kept making jokes. Doug could take just about anything that anyone said and make a joke out of it. Every time he did, Rebecca would turn away from Rick and look at him. Rick was persistent. He'd try a different tack and it would just start to look like Rebecca was getting interested when Doug would make another wisecrack and she'd switch her attention back to him. It was too bad, because Rick often had interesting things to say.

After a while, Rick stood up, walked over to Faye, and asked her about the snowshoes. She uttered a few grudging words, but then, as Rick expressed more interest, she relaxed. He sat beside her and she showed him what she was doing. Rebecca giggled with Doug.

Rick was the kind of guy that mothers loved. I'd hear it all the time from my own mother: "Rick is such a nice boy. He's so polite." He always knew what to say, and he asked questions as if he meant them. Doug, on the other hand, was the kind mothers barely tolerated. It was clear which of the two they'd rather you chum around with.

It was interesting to watch Rick and Faye. She explained technique and demonstrated it, and you knew Rick was taking it all in. However, they didn't seem to be looking at one another entirely. Both of them were spending just as much time watching Rebecca and Doug.

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About that point I went to use the outhouse. When I came back, Rick was talking to Faye about the dogs.

"Are they really as fierce as they seem?" he asked. "Is there some trick to managing them?"

I didn't hear Faye's answer, but she can't have told him much. By the time I got back to my chair, she had finished talking. I have no idea how much about handling those dogs Rick learned in a few seconds. He picked things up fast, though. Anyway, he was on to another question and I distracted myself by thinking about apple pie with ice cream and a large glass of milk.

By nine o'clock, the rain had stopped. Normally, when we were camped in the woods, this was the time we turned in, anticipating an early start the next morning. But on this night, the occasion being special, Mr. Walker wasn't urging us towards our tents. He seemed quite content to sit chatting with Nick, peppering him with questions and occasionally trying to interest the rest of us with his low-key, "Did you hear that, boys?" or, "Say, fellows, isn't that something?" Having been too late to get in on the Monopoly game, I'd tune in and out of that conversation and then try to pick up snatches of what Doug and Rick were saying to Rebecca. Rick must have run out of things to discuss with Faye. Now, when he could squeeze some words in around Doug, he was telling Rebecca about what we'd seen and done on the trip. Doug, on the other hand, was telling her about life in Toronto. Her eyes shifted back and forth, but they showed the most spark when Doug laid out a new tidbit.

I didn't notice when the rain ended. I was too busy sending out signals to Nick, trying to will him to offer us some cookies or chocolate cake, although I had no idea if trapper families were big cake eaters. If I had been paying attention, I would have realized that the dogs had stopped whining.

I only noticed when Rebecca said something about constellations.

"What about the clouds?" Rick asked.

Rebecca laughed. "They'll have blown by already, or they will soon."

"Can we see the Northern Lights?" Doug asked. This was a kind of private joke with Doug, who had got me and Jerry, at the beginning of the trip, with what was obviously an old trick. "Do you want to see the Northern Lights in the daytime?" he had asked. "Sure," I replied with enthusiasm. He had me put my jacket over my head and, while he held one arm up toward the sky, he told me to look up the sleeve. Then he poured a cup of water down from the cuff. He'd laughed considerably over that.

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"Not tonight," Rebecca said. "But I can point out lots of constellations. Tell you what they mean."

That sounded good. I decided to join them. When they stood to go outside, Faye called Rebecca over and whispered to her. Rebecca said something back, in a whisper, too, but one of those harsh ones that can be more startling than a shout. Doug distracted everyone by announcing, louder than I had been brought up to believe was polite, that he had to relieve himself. Faye gave him another cold stare.

With Doug already gone, Rick waited for Rebecca and followed her to the door. He seemed anxious to be away, as if he didn't want to wait for Doug to return. I started after them. Faye was watching. I waved to her and pointed upwards, to signify the sky and the constellations, but this may have just got her wondering what I'd spotted on her ceiling, because she frowned.

Rick didn't notice that I was tagging along until we were outside.

"Where are you going?" he asked.

"To see the constellations," I said, glancing up. The clouds had largely scattered, leaving a few tattered remnants and a fresco of stars.

"No, you're not," Rick said. He sounded rushed and annoyed. That wasn't like him. Usually Rick was calm and patient, especially with the younger kids. The only person who ever seemed to annoy him was Doug.

"Why not?" I asked. "I'm interested."

"I don't care," Rick snapped. Then he turned and looked around. "Where's Rebecca?"

Although I had seen her go along the path that led away from the doghouses, I was so disappointed and hurt that I pointed with certainty in the wrong direction, towards the pack. "Don't follow me," Rick said nervously, looking towards where the dogs lurked. After a hesitant moment, he went that way.

In trying to find Rebecca, Rick may have gone too close to the doghouses, because I heard them snarl briefly, but they settled down, probably satisfied that they had frightened off an intruder.

With the dogs quiet, the silence of the night struck me again. It was a reminder of what Nick said: that in this country you were alone and you had to rely on yourself and do what was necessary to survive. The darkness intensified the feeling, for, even with light from the cabin's windows through the trees, it was darker than any night at home.

I was still standing there a minute later, staring at the sky and trying uselessly to sort out its mysteries for myself, when Doug came back.

"Where's Rebecca?" he asked.

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"Over there," I said, showing him the route she'd taken. Then I went back to looking at the stars.

Mr. Walker was sitting next to Faye, a snowshoe in his hands. She was explaining how to string it properly, keeping the gut aligned in the right way and the tension sufficient. He bent to the task with the deep concentration he had, his pipe smoking away as if it were the chimney for the steam engine that powered his mind.

As Mr. Walker worked, Faye finished her snowshoe and took it into the back of the cabin. She must have gone to the outhouse afterwards, because I felt a breeze as if the back door had opened briefly and then been quietly closed.

The Monopoly game was still in full swing, although Bish had all his property mortgaged and was offering to do chores for people instead of paying rent when he landed on a St. James Place or a North Carolina Avenue chockablock with hotels.

I had been back inside for maybe five minutes when Rick came in. He looked angry, his mouth drawn thinly. He stopped inside the door and looked at Mr. Walker, as if thinking about speaking to him. But the teacher was so involved with the snowshoe that he had not noticed Rick, who came over and stood next to me, watching the board game.

"Did you see Doug after you saw me?" he asked, his voice low.

I sensed trouble, but I couldn't lie about that. "Yes."

"Did he go near the tents?"

"Yes."

"Did you see him go in our tent?"

"No, I just saw him head in that direction. Why?"

"Because there's fifty cents of mine missing. It was in a pocket of my pack and it's gone."

"Maybe you misplaced it," I suggested.

"I don't misplace money," Rick said, and I was sure that was true. He was the orderly, organized type.

"Are you sure Doug took it?"

"You know Doug."

"Are you going to tell Mr. Walker?" I looked over my shoulder to the snowshoe and the smoking brier.

"I'll deal with it myself." He stared at the board game for another moment, seeming to focus on the brightly colored bills in the bank. Then he went outside again.

It wasn't much later that the screaming started. There was no way of telling who was screaming, it was so high-pitched and terrified. It was also mixed with the fiercest snarling and yelping yet from the dogs.

Everyone froze except Nick, who was out the door instantly. We followed, snowshoes and Monopoly forgotten. The screaming grew

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louder and more shrill. The snarling intensified. We burst outside in a loose pack and charged down the path to the dogs. Mr. Walker and Bish called for us to stay back, but we were all worked up and excited to find out what was going on. The screaming got worse, and we could hear Nick's voice, strong and stern. What were we doing, I wondered, rushing pell-mell towards something dangerous and unknown? Unlike the day of the bears, we didn't even have our paddles to protect us.

We came near the dogs, which had been whipped into a frenzy. At first it looked like they were all still tethered. Then we saw that Chinook and his chain were gone.

We stopped where we were and called out, "Doug! Rick!" The shrieking was still coming from beyond the tents.

Mr. Walker said, "Stay here, boys. Bish, stay with 'em," and he went further up the trail, cautiously.

We stayed, but kept calling out. To our right, the bushes rustled. Everyone tensed up, prepared to run, but it wasn't Chinook. It was Doug and Rebecca. They moved clumsily, holding each other and sobbing.

"Where's Rick?" Bish asked.

Doug waved his arm in the direction Mr. Walker had gone. "There," was all he could manage. He and Rebecca held each other tightly.

Then Mr. Walker called out, "Bish! Get up here!"

We all went and found Rick about fifty yards along the trail, still screaming, although the dog had stopped biting him. He was on the ground, writhing, torn and bloody. Mr. Walker had wrapped the Breezy All-Weather around him, but it could not cover all the wounds.

Chinook was a short distance away, straining at the chain, snarling and lunging at the boy on the ground. Nick had the chain wrapped twice around the trunk of a tree and held the loose end, like Hercules holding back Cerberus. There was strain in his face, but when he called to us his voice was calm. "Boys, tell Faye to get out here. We need some of her healing salve."

To be honest, it looked like Rick needed more than salve, but if that was all they had, it would have to do. There was no need to go for Faye. She was there as if she'd been waiting, with bandages and a pottery container filled with thick, floral-smelling goo. Nick looked surprised to see her there so quickly.

When she saw Rick, she let out a wail, then ran to him and began tending his wounds. Her hands moved gently and she whispered words I couldn't make out.

Nick said something, too, obviously aimed at the dog but spoken while he watched Faye bent over the savaged boy. "Bad," he said. "Bad."

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Rick whimpered as Faye wrapped bandages around him. His legs, back, both arms, and one side of his face were torn open, and if the light had been better, God knows what of his inner workings we would have seen.

Rick must have passed out eventually, because he made no sound when Mr. Walker picked him up. We were all about to head back to the cabin when Nick said to me, "Bring my flashlight, boy." It was lying on the ground a few feet from where he stood still holding the end of the chain. Chinook had calmed considerably now, but I was glad that Nick kept a tight grip.

When I had the flashlight, Nick told me to step back. He began unwinding the chain from the tree and creating a coil of it that dangled from one hand, careful not to let it go slack. Soon he had the dog on a short lead. "Follow me," he said. "But shine the light on ahead, along the ground." As he walked down the trail with the dog heeling, he looked like any man taking his pet out late at night. The only difference was the heavy chain instead of a slender leash.

Nick took a circuitous route around the other dogs, which were restless and snarling. When he came to the far doghouse he stopped. "Move around that way," he said, indicating a course away from the pack, "then shine the light down here." I was anxious to see where the dog had snapped its chain. When I aimed the light at the side of the doghouse, there was a thick iron ring anchored in the wood. No broken links hung from the ring. Nick knelt down and clipped the end of the unbroken chain to the ring and then told me to step further back. Only then did he stand and drop the chain. He walked over to me and took the flashlight and I followed him back to the cabin. All the way I wondered how that dog had got loose.

Rick survived the night, although his screams kept the rest of us awake. As soon as dawn broke, Nick and Mr. Walker loaded him into Nick's freighter canoe. Faye was there with a blanket for him to lie on and a fur robe to cover him. She put her hand on his head briefly. Then the canoe set off downriver towards the hospital in Moose Factory. Doug was watching, too, but he had no jokes in him.

I watched the canoe until it reached a bend in the river and vanished. Even after, I stood there, a hint of guilt gnawing at my stomach. It had occurred to me during a period of sleeplessness, while Rick screamed and cried, that he must have released the dog. He must have swallowed his fear and unlatched the chain, thinking Chinook would attack Doug and punish him. I couldn't quite figure out how he'd got close to the dogs without rousing them, but I was sure it had happened. Believing that made the fifty cents feel heavy in my pocket. ●

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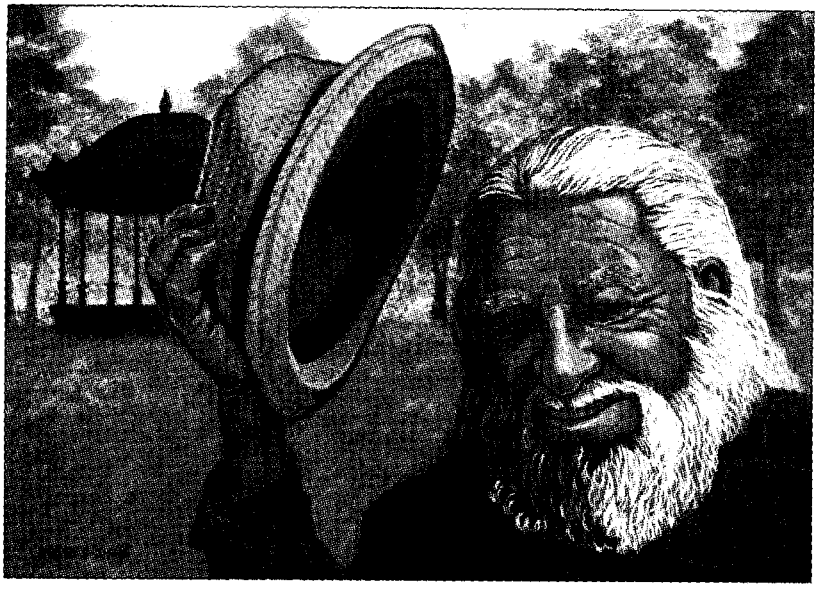

Art by Luis Perez

Old Bag Dad

by Keith Miles

Nobody knew his real name. Since he was in his seventies, kept all of his worldly possessions in a plastic bag, and had a paternal manner, he was known as Old Bag Dad. Everyone who visited the Memorial Park knew and liked him. He was an institution. Sitting on his favorite bench and wearing the same tattered clothes year in and year out, he was a familiar figure in the community landscape, a cherished eccentric who radiated a kind of gentle wisdom.

Children loved him, parents trusted him, and Douglas Pym, the head park keeper, treated him with amused reverence. Old Bag Dad was not a troublemaker, or a wino, or a beggar, or a misfit, or a lunatic, or even one of the many aimless drifters who wandered in from time to time. He was, by his own definition, a good old-fashioned unrepentant tramp.

The bag was incongruous. Emblazoned with the distinctive logo of Harrods, it was filled with the most amazing range of items. It was hard to believe that Old Bag Dad had actually shopped in London's most exclusive store, still less that he had bought there

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the penny whistle, the golliwogg, the pack of Tarot cards, the straw boater, the magnifying glass, the Tartan scarf, the alarm clock, the bicycle pump, the dog-eared copy of *War and Peace,* or any of the other unlikely objects that he invariably carried around with him. He was a collector with random tastes.

Douglas Pym always teased the old man about the bag. When he saw his friend on his bench that morning, he could not resist a joke.

"What have you got in there today?" he asked, peering into the bag. "Something from Harrods' Food Hall?"

"Loaf of stale bread, Doug. That's all."

"Where did you get that?"

"I have my sources," said the old man with a smile.

"They never seem to let you down. You always manage to get grub from somewhere. I saw you with a punnet of strawberries yesterday. Who gave you those?"

"That would be telling!"

Old Bag Dad was very fond of Douglas Pym. Though the park was locked every night, the old man was allowed to sleep there during warmer months, stretching out on his bench under a newspaper or two. On rainy days, Pym even left the door to his storeroom open so that his resident tramp could slumber under a roof for a change. What happened to Old Bag Dad in the winter was a mystery that Pym had never managed to solve. He repeated a question that he had asked a hundred times over the years.

"Where do you *go,* Bag Dad?"

"Here and there."

"Come on," said the park keeper, nudging him. "You can tell me now. I retire next week. I'll take your secret with me. Scout's honor! Where do you hide out in the winter?"

"I migrate south with the birds."

"Can't you be more specific?"

"No," said the old man. "You'd only follow me."

"What did you do before you became a tramp?"

"I lived a useless and unproductive existence."

"And now?"

As is the case with many prolific and successful authors, Keith Miles also writes under pseudonyms, his most famous being "Edward Marston," which he reserves for his historical series. A new Marston novel, *The Counterfeit Crank* (an Elizabethan theater mystery featuring series character Nicholas Bracewell) is just out from St. Martin's, and a new novel in his series of golfing mysteries, *The Honolulu Play-Off* (as Keith Miles), was published in April. †

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Old Bag Dad gave a throaty chuckle. "I'm happy," he said.

"I'm not sure that your happiness will continue," warned Pym sadly. "My successor may not be as easygoing as me. Ex-army man. Does everything by the book."

"I'll win him over, Doug."

"You may find it difficult. Ken Latimer's a martinet. When I told him that I made a few allowances for you, he said that they'd have to stop right away. Watch out, Bag Dad. He's a bossy type. Likes to throw his weight about."

Old Bag Dad grinned. "I'll charm the pants off him."

His voice was educated, his manners impeccable. It led many people to speculate about his earlier life. Some believed he was a university professor who had fallen on hard times, or a brilliant scientist who had had some kind of mental breakdown, or even a famous writer who could no longer get published. What set him apart from every other tramp was the pleasant aroma that always surrounded him. In a way of life not known for its attention to basic hygiene, Old Bag Dad was noted for his strong whiff of after-shave lotion, an odd choice for a man who had not shaved for years. It was almost as if he bathed in it.

"Good luck, anyway," said Pym, offering his hand.

Old Bag Dad shook it. "Thanks for everything, Doug."

"I should be thanking *you*. Whenever you're around, the kids seem to behave much better. They wouldn't dare to use drugs or sniff glue while Old Bag Dad is watching them. You're a one-man police force."

"I've been called worse."

"Not by me."

Douglas Pym gave him a salute before walking away. When he glanced over his shoulder, a young woman was asking the tramp to keep an eye on her baby while she went to the restroom. It was visible proof of the trust that he inspired. Singing a lullaby, Old Bag Dad rocked the child gently in its buggy. He was a picture of contentment.

Set in the heart of a large Midlands city, the Memorial Park was one of its finest assets. It contained three football pitches, two tennis courts, an open-air swimming bath, a well-tended bowling green, and—a quaint survival from an earlier age—a magnificent wrought-iron bandstand that was an irresistible challenge to juvenile climbers. Older visitors preferred the botanical gardens, but younger ones opted for the playground and its child-safe equipment. It was near the playground that Old Bag Dad liked to sit. Reclining on his bench, he was reading a book when he had his first encounter with the new head park keeper.

Ken Latimer did not believe in mincing his words. He was a tall,

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well-built man in his late forties with a military bearing. A tiny moustache bristled at the center of a craggy face. Marching up to the tramp, he stood over him and looked down with disdain.

"So!" he sneered. "You're Old Bag Dad, are you?"

"That's what they call me," replied the other.

"Well, I don't care whether you're Old Bag Dad or Old Beirut. All I can see is a tramp who lowers the standards around here. My name is Mr. Latimer and my aim is to lick this place into shape." He leaned forward. "You're not welcome here anymore. Got it?"

"It's a public park. You can't throw me out."

"I can, if you break the rules."

"Is there a rule against reading *War and Peace?*" asked the tramp, holding up his book. "I would have thought an army man like you would recommend such literature."

"Don't try any back chat with me, old man," cautioned the park keeper. "I'm not a soft touch like Doug Pym. Try to be clever with me and I'll have you out of here in a shot. Got it?"

"Yes, Mr. Latimer."

"Law and order have come to the Memorial Park."

"They never went away."

"Oh, yes, they did. I'm no mug. I know what's been going on. Young kids playing truant so that they could hang around here and smoke. Couples groping each other in the long grass. Drunks puking all over the place. And a certain person," he added meaningfully, "daring to spend the whole night in the park."

"I had an arrangement with Doug Pym."

"I've just cancelled it."

"Why are you being so hostile, old chap?" asked the tramp, trying his warmest smile on the keeper. "At bottom, I'm on your side."

"Not from where I stand," retorted Latimer. "I work for a living, you don't. I contribute, you simply take. You're nothing but a parasite. A filthy, hairy, disgusting old parasite."

"Bear with me and I'm sure that you'll learn to love me."

"Never! I rule the roost now—got it?"

"I think so."

"Well, remember what I said. When the bell goes this evening, you leave the park along with everyone else. Trespassers will be prosecuted. In your case," he said vengefully, "you'll have a boot up your backside as well. Is that understood?"

"Tolstoy could not have put it more clearly."

"Who's he? Another tramp?"

"Don't you ever *read,* Mr. Latimer?"

"Only the Rule Book. It tells me all I want to know."

Ken Latimer was as good as his word. A strict new regime was imposed upon the park, but it made him few friends. The keepers

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were more vigilant and liable to chastise wrongdoers for the smallest misdemeanor. If anyone so much as let an ice-cream wrapper fall inadvertently to the ground, they were pounced on and reprimanded. Suddenly, the Memorial Park was no longer a place for fun and relaxation. Even in the botanical gardens, the iron hand of Ken Latimer was in evidence. Every visitor, young, old, or middle-aged, was aware of being under surveillance.

It was at night that Latimer claimed his greatest success. Fearing that the park was a meeting place for drug users, he instituted nocturnal patrols and chased any youths away. Lovers were also put to flight, caught *in flagrante* and subjected to the ear-splitting sound of Latimer's whistle. Another victim was Molly Mandrake, a local woman of almost fifty summers, who regularly serviced her clients after dark, and who could somehow get in and out of the park at will. With his torch and whistle, Latimer soon put an end to Molly's lucrative nighttime ventures.

He congratulated himself on what he saw as a moral triumph. No drugs, no sex—free or paid for—and no tramps. On behalf of the local community, he had comprehensively cleaned up the park. It was true that he opened his office some mornings to be met by the faintest smell of aftershave lotion, but he never for a moment connected it with a man he perceived as a filthy, hairy, disgusting old parasite. Besides, how could Old Bag Dad possibly gain access to an office that had three locks and a burglar alarm to guard it?

Ken Latimer was in control. The Memorial Park was run like clockwork and its dissident elements quickly driven away. The head park keeper could strut around as if he were still on the parade ground.

But then, the unthinkable occurred.

"Who first discovered the body, Mr. Latimer?" asked the chief inspector.

"I did," replied the park keeper. "At seven forty-five A.M. precisely."

"How can you be so sure of the time?"

"Because I always arrive a quarter of an hour before the gates are unlocked. As soon as I entered the park, I knew that something was wrong. When I glanced towards the bandstand, I saw the body."

"What did you do?"

"I ran across to see if there were any vital signs, of course," explained Latimer. "When I realized that she was dead, I took care not to damage the integrity of the crime scene."

"Yes," said Chief Inspector Fallowell, "we're grateful to you for that. Did you, by any chance, recognize the lady?"

"She was no lady, Chief Inspector. That's Molly Mandrake."

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"Show her some respect, sir. It's a hideous way to die."

"She had no right to be in the park."

"That doesn't mean she deserves to be throttled," said Fallowell with compassion. "I know that you've been cracking the whip around here, Mr. Latimer, but surely even you would not advocate that intruders should be murdered in cold blood."

"I suspect that the blood may have been a little hotter on this occasion, Chief Inspector. Molly and her client did not come in here to discuss theology."

"How do you know it was one of her clients?"

"Who else could it have been?"

"An angry park keeper, perhaps."

Tom Fallowell, head of the Murder Investigation Team, did not like the man he was interviewing in the shadow of the ancient bandstand. Summoned by a call from Latimer, he had resented his hortatory manner. Fallowell had great affection for the park. He had played there as a child and was now captain of the bowls team. His own children had also enjoyed the amenities but they, like so many others, found the place far less welcoming than it had been. Latimer's reign had driven dozens of regular visitors away.

"I want this murder solved, Chief Inspector," said the keeper.

"These things can't be rushed, sir."

"I've gone to great lengths to sweep this park clean. The last thing I need is a dead body lying in the middle of it. It's bad publicity. Got it?"

"Molly Mandrake did not get herself killed deliberately," argued the detective. "I know that she had reason to hate you, but even she would draw the line at being strangled so that she could ruin your nice, neat, well-behaved, spick-and-span park."

"Don't be sarcastic with me, Chief Inspector."

"Then don't try to tell me my job, sir. A murder investigation is a slow process. If we have to keep the park closed for a week, so be it. I'll not be chivvied along by you." He closed his notebook. "Have you spoken to Old Bag Dad yet?"

"No. Why should I?"

"Because he may be able to help us."

"He's been banned from the park at night."

"So was Molly Mandrake, but that didn't stop her, did it?"

"Old Bag Dad was nowhere near the place last night."

"Nevertheless, we'd like to have a word with him."

"It would be a waste of time," said Latimer testily. "After what I said to him, he wouldn't dare come here after dark. I put the fear of death into him."

"I doubt that, sir," said the other with a half-smile. "You obvi-

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ously don't know Old Bag Dad as well as we do. Did it never occur to you that Doug Pym let him stay here overnight for a reason?"

"Doug felt sorry for him, that's all."

"No, Mr. Latimer. Your predecessor had the sense to see how useful the old man could be. He was a sort of guard dog. There were no break-ins here when Old Bag Dad was on the prowl. And no drug users, either. Not because he'd try to arrest them—how could he?—but because he'd *talk* to them. He has a very persuasive tongue, you know. Old Bag Dad would do his damnedest to persuade them how stupid it was to rely on drugs for their kicks."

Latimer was scornful. "We don't need tramps here."

"Fortunately, Doug Pym disagreed. That's why we caught the lads who tried to vandalize the bowling green. Old Bag Dad saw them at it. He also foiled thieves who attempted to raid the botanical gardens. And there were many other occasions when he was a key witness."

Latimer was stunned. "You'd listen to the word of a man like that?"

"With gratitude."

"Well, he can't help you this time, Inspector."

"You may be surprised on that score."

Fallowell turned away to supervise his scene-of-crime team and the park keeper was left to ponder. He was seething with frustration. The murder had made nonsense of his claim to have cleaned up the park. It was almost as if someone were deliberately trying to get back at him. He could think of only one person who might do that—Old Bag Dad.

It was two days before the park was reopened. Visitors swarmed in, still buzzing with curiosity about the crime and anxious to see the exact place where it had occurred. Molly Mandrake's profession added a lurid glow to the whole affair. In their press statement, the police announced that the victim had suffered death by asphyxiation, though they were reticent about any sexual abuse involved. Colorful theories abounded.

When the head park keeper did a circuit of his domain, he was taken aback to see Old Bag Dad on his favorite bench. The tramp was in the process of eating a banana. Ken Latimer bore down on him.

"Don't you dare throw that banana skin on the ground," he warned.

"You have enough of those already," said the tramp with a glint in his eye. "And it seems that you slipped on one of them. What happened to your nightly patrol, Mr. Latimer? You boasted that you'd make the park safe after dark."

"That's exactly what I did."

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"Try telling that to Molly Mandrake."

"She had no business being in here."

Old Bag Dad stiffened. "I hope you're not going to tell me that she was asking for it," he said, sounding a note of challenge. "No woman should suffer that fate. Molly may not've been a saint, but she's entitled to our sympathy. God bless her!"

"Have you spoken to the police yet?" demanded Latimer.

"Why on earth should I do that?"

"Chief Inspector Fallowell thought you might've seen something."

"Yes," said the tramp with a chuckle. "I noticed that Tom Fallowell was in charge of the case. He's a friend of mine. Give him my regards when you see him again."

"You're the one who should see him."

"Am I?"

"Tell him what you know."

"About what?"

"This crime," said Latimer with irritation. "You know this park, and the people who use it, better than anybody. You must have ideas."

"Dozens of them," admitted the other, getting up. "Excuse me while I put this banana skin in the bin. You won't slip on it then."

"Were you acquainted with Molly Mandrake?"

"Not in a professional sense." He dropped the banana skin into the metal bin. "But we often had a chat. Molly was good company. She used to be a bus conductor, you know. In the dear old days when we had such luxuries. Apparently, that's how it all started."

"What did?"

"Her change of direction. When they switched over to driver-only buses, Molly was out of work. She'd been so popular with her male colleagues that she decided to start charging for her expertise. I recall her telling me that it was just like being a bus conductor," he went on with a fond smile. "They bought their ticket and she took them on a very pleasant journey." He heaved a sigh. "The other night, alas, she reached her terminus."

Latimer eyed him shrewdly. "You *know* something, don't you?"

"I know lots of things, my friend."

"You have information about this murder."

"How could I?"

"It's a crime to withhold evidence. Do you realize that?"

"What evidence could I have, Mr. Latimer?" taunted the old man. "I'm banned from the park after dark. You evicted me from my bench."

"You might have sneaked back in here."

"And eluded your eagle eyes? How could I possibly do that?"

"This is important. We're talking about a serious crime."

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"Nobody is as anxious as me to see the killer brought to book," said the tramp firmly. "Molly was a friend of mine. She was so full of life." He shook his head slowly. "Molly was like me, Mr. Latimer. A harmless soul who relies on the sympathy and understanding of others. She also relied on their weaknesses, I grant you, but that doesn't contradict my argument. Molly needed the kind of tolerance that Doug Pym used to give us. If he'd still been here, I have a feeling that she'd be alive to this day."

Latimer blenched. "Are you saying *I* am responsible for her death?"

"Not exactly."

"My intention was to get rid of any crime."

"That was tantamount to throwing down the gauntlet," said the old man. "Some people hate authority. When they're given orders, they have this tendency to disobey them. Molly *had* to go on coming here."

"And what about you?"

"Oh, I'm much more law-abiding."

"Don't lie to me."

Old Bag Dad beamed. "I always tell the truth to a man in a peaked cap," he declared. "And you look as if you were born with it on."

Ken Latimer was stymied. He realized that bullying would get him nowhere this time. If he wanted cooperation from the old man, he had to trade. It was a bitter pill to swallow, but the future of the park was at stake. He could not let an unsolved murder hang over it like a dark cloud.

"Right," he said. "Let's have it. What's the deal?"

"Deal?"

"You were a witness. We need you to come forward."

"But I was forbidden to come here at night," the tramp reminded him. "If I give evidence, you'll prosecute me for trespassing on council property. My lawyer would never allow me to do anything like that."

"There'll be no prosecution, Bag Dad."

"What guarantee do I have of that?"

"My promise," said Latimer proudly. "I'll stand by it."

"I need something more. I want to go back to the old arrangement."

"You, staying the night here? I won't have that."

"Then there's no deal. Got it?"

"There has to be. My reputation is at stake here."

The old man indicated the bench. "So is my bed."

"If I let you stay overnight, I'd be breaking the rules."

"Join the club, Mr. Latimer."

The keeper's head sank to his chest. After a lifetime of enforcing

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rules and regulations, he was faced with an impossible dilemma. He could stay true to his principles and risk having an unsolved crime leaving a permanent stain on his park. Or he could compromise. It required a huge effort on his part.

"Very well," he conceded grudgingly. "You win."

"I'd prefer it if we could shake hands on that."

It was almost too much to ask. Latimer was a fastidious man with a deep-seated hatred of tramps, but he knew that Old Bag Dad was in a position to dictate terms. With severe misgivings, he extended his hand. The other man shook it, then walked across to pick up his bag.

"I think I'll go and have a talk with Tom Fallowell," he said.

When he arrived at the police station, Old Bag Dad was taken straight to the chief inspector. A mass of evidence had already been collected, but no suspect had yet emerged. The police were baffled. The tramp was able to supply a crucial detail.

"I caught a glimpse of the registration number on the car."

"What was it?" pressed Fallowell.

"This is only a guess, mind you," said the old man. "It was quite dark. Luckily, he left the door open when he got out of the car so the courtesy light was on. That meant I saw him clearly."

"Did you recognize him?"

"Not exactly."

"And the number of the car?"

"I think it was W848 MJK."

"Any idea of the make?"

"A Mondeo. But don't ask me the color, Tom."

Fallowell wrote down the details on a slip of paper and handed it to a colleague. The latter immediately picked up a telephone to trace the owner of the vehicle. The chief inspector turned to Old Bag Dad.

"Why didn't you tell us this before?"

"I was held up by a legal technicality."

"Would his name happen to be Ken Latimer?"

"No wonder you became a detective!"

"Thanks for coming forward, Bag Dad," said Fallowell. "This may be the breakthrough that we need. But next time you have evidence," he stressed, "make sure that you give it immediately. In a murder inquiry, we expect help from the public."

The old man winked. "Oh, I think you'll find that I've given that."

Ten minutes later, Chief Inspector Fallowell was in a police car leading a convoy to an address that they had been given. When they reached their destination, they found the house in a quiet

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cul-de-sac. Standing on the drive was a blue Ford Mondeo with the correct registration plate. The inspector leapt out of the car and deployed his men around the property. He rang the bell, but got no response. When he pounded on the door with his fist, he still elicited no reply. Standing back, he nodded to a waiting police officer, who smashed down the door without ceremony. Armed detectives surged into the house to be met by a sight that made them stop in their tracks.

Chief Inspector Fallowell was as astonished as the rest of them. The man they wanted to interview could not have answered the door, even if he had wanted to do so. Sitting in an upright chair, he was bound and gagged. The look of desperation in his eyes was a confession of guilt in itself. He was untied, asked his name, then formally arrested on a charge of murder. Fallowell ordered his men to take the prisoner out. Others were told to search the premises.

One of the detectives sniffed the air. He wrinkled his nose.

"What's that?" he asked. "Smells like aftershave lotion."

"Funny," said Fallowell with a knowing smile. "Can't smell a thing."

Douglas Pym soon got to hear how a brutal murder had been solved with the help of a tramp who was trespassing on council property. He was delighted to learn how Old Bag Dad had wrested a vital concession from the new head park keeper. The tramp had the freedom of the park once more. Pym caught his friend on his usual bench, finishing the last chapter of *War and Peace.* The old man let out a chuckle of satisfaction.

"I always wondered how the book ended," he said.

"What's it to be with Ken Latimer from now on—war or peace?"

"Peace with honor, Doug."

"Be careful. He bears grudges."

"I fancy that he'll keep out of my way from now on."

"Until the cold weather sets in," noted Pym. "Even you won't stay around the Memorial Park then. You'll be up and away."

"Following the sun."

"But where to? I do wish you'd tell me that."

"Then I'll let you into the secret, Doug. I go to the Middle East."

"The Middle East?"

"My spiritual home."

"Are you pulling my leg?"

"Of course not. There's only one place I *could* go."

"Is there?"

"Yes," said the tramp with a grin. "Old Baghdad." ●

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JUST KIDDING

by David Bart

Arturo Zuniga—San Antonio, Texas.

Caller ID on Jack Hafner's machine showed the same name, city, and a phone number recorded a bunch of times over the past three days when he and Leah'd been out of town. Separate trips, of course. He'd been in Vegas and who in hell knew where she'd gone.

Jack grinned—guy's initials spanned the alphabet A to Z; how trite. Didn't know anybody by that name; in fact, he didn't know a soul in San Antonio or the whole damn state of Texas. Could be some old classmate from prep school or college had ended up in the Lone Star State, but Jack wasn't a keeping-in-touch kind of a guy.

This Arturo Zuniga must have a wrong number. That had to be it. Yeah, the guy gets nobody when he calls, just an electronic voice telling him to leave a message, which he ignores; nobody to tell him he'd somehow scribbled down the wrong number, so Arturo just keeps on punching in the same number every night. God must love morons, He sure made a lot of them.

Eight o'clock now, if his Rolex can be believed—*For eight grand it better damn well be right*—and this Zuniga guy had called each of the last three nights, each night the first call coming in between eight-thirteen and eight-nineteen. No reason to think he wouldn't call tonight somewhere in there.

"You better just leave it alone, Jack," his wife Leah whined, peering through her blue-tinted contacts, watching him, confident he was hatching some kind of plan, some kind of joke. Well, for once she was right.

A resident of Albuquerque, New Mexico, David Bart has placed nine stories with our sister magazine, *AHMM*, and two additional tales with the series of anthologies put out under the aegis of the Mystery Writers of America (see the volumes edited by Jeffery Deaver and Stuart M. Kaminsky). His first work for *EQMM* features a practical joker whose sense of humor takes a dangerous turn.

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Leah. Maiden name Leah Burke, of the humorless, no-imagination Burkes; father and mother had no sense of humor, either. Country-club ice tinklers, mean-spirited gossips, hoarding their Old Money like it was—money. They couldn't understand Jack's love of the practical joke. "What's practical about it?" her father often demanded, frowning hard enough to sink an oil tanker, black mood spreading like insidious crude through his family's life. Morbid old bastard.

Leah is Mrs. Jack Hafner now, over three years. But still no sense of humor; 'course, his first two wives hadn't had any sense of humor, either. Maybe it was just women, a gender thing. Or maybe wives.

"I know it's just a wrong number, Leah, like to have some fun with it is all—sue me." Emphasizing the remark with both hands, palms up, allowing his lower lip to droop, gestures he knew irritated her.

Thinking: My God, woman, a person's gotta have a sense of humor, gotta laugh once in a while or you get depressed; life's enough of a disappointment, not seeing the funny edge on things makes it even worse.

His wife was ranting. "You need to *work,* dammit—just 'cause we have money doesn't mean you shouldn't be doing something productive." Glaring at him like he was on a street corner with his hand out, for Christ's sake.

"Oh yeah, Miz Pro Bono—help the needy and the smelly," he said, the retort punctuated with an enduring chuckle.

—and there she goes, flouncing out of the room like a spoiled debutante after some guy at her coming-out ball has just spilled a drink on her, galactically pissed that things weren't going her way. Spoiled rotten. Short blond hair bouncing impatiently as she walked out of the room—slitted black skirt with a crimson blouse, probably those barely-there black bikini panties she favored, though he hadn't seen her dressing. Stair-stepper calves, an indoor tan. And high heels?

He leaned to his left to see past the couch, get a glimpse of her retreating feet. Yup. Stilettos. Bloody-murder red.

Jack collapsed into the deep couch, air whooshing from the cushion, stared at the silent phone, running scenarios, trying out dialogue—editing, parsing, changing a word here and there and then starting over again. He did this for five minutes, polishing his act. With a wide grin he decided he'd definitely get some fun out of this little game. Arturo Zuniga might not think so, but who would give a rat's ass? Probably not even *Mrs.* Zuniga, if there is one.

Practicing aloud: "Yeah, hey, saw you called, what's up, amigo?" Saying this to the empty room.

Shook his head, not satisfied. Better to act as if he knew what

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the guy was calling about, but friendly, like they were lifelong pals. Again, "Hey, buddy, where you been?"

Yeah, he'd play this guy like a cello when the call came in, pretend they were old buds, take it as far as—

His wife's BMW roared to life, revving again and again, the racket coming from just outside in the driveway, then a low rumble—headlight glare pierced the gauzy fabric languidly swaying in front of the floor-to-ceiling window—then the whining, chattering sound of a car backing away too fast in reverse, headlights swinging in an angry arc, sustained screeching of tires, and the little Bavarian set of wheels was on its way out of the upscale Denver suburb, probably plastering late-night joggers against trees or knocking strollers into hedges.

Jack glanced down at his Rolex: Eight-eighteen.

Arturo Zuniga looked at his black Seiko.

Eight-twenty. But the damn thing ran fast so it was time to make the call. He should have gotten a Rolex by now, money he was making, but his mother had given him this watch twenty years ago and it was still running. Dependable, except for the tendency to get ahead of itself.

He thought of Murphy. Where had that little shit been the last three days? Supposed to be at the number three nights ago, between eight and eight-twenty.

Zuniga picked up the phone and punched in a one, area code of three-zero-three, and—checked his note again—then punched in the number Murphy had given him; the loquacious redhead had said he lived just a block and a half from Mile High Stadium, probably a lie. Going off on his neighborhood having a lot of big trees, telling Arturo about indigenous foliage, like he'd be interested. Murphy was a motor-mouth gofer, but he was connected.

Son of a bitch had better be there tonight, though, or he'd wish he'd never screwed this up. Arturo had ways to make a guy's life miserable and beyond miserable, all the way to downright excruciating. He could put a major hurt on the Irish twit.

First ring.

Pick up, you pea-brained little—

Second ring.

Damn him to hell.

Zuniga closed his eyes; inside his mind he began visualizing the long drive northwest to Colorado, the vast shimmering plateau surrounding him—wait, modify that, erase the sunlit scene, replace it with total black; the landscape would be invisible in the darkness as Arturo sped along the interstate, absence of light matching his black mood—driving up there to pay back a wannabe player for not doing what he—

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"That you, Arty?" the voice at the other end blurted.

Arty? What the hell was that—nobody called him that.

"Murphy?" he demanded.

"Uh . . . yeah—what's up, pard'?"

"Where the hell you been the last three days?" Arturo demanded.

Pause. Clearing of throat. "I, uh, had a gas leak, they wouldn't let me in—afraid of an explosion or something, I guess." His voice sounded hoarse. From a cold or something. Maybe too much grass.

Arturo sighed. "I guess you heard the man's history—why didn't you call?"

The voice said, "Well, like I mentioned, they wouldn't, uh, well . . . didn't have your number." Voice less hoarse, but more tentative. Maybe scared.

He was right, though. Zuniga hadn't given him his number or, for that matter, even his location. Far as Murphy knew, Arturo was calling from New York City. The less clients or their operatives knew, the better—ah hell, Caller ID; Murphy probably had it, so he did have this number.

"You got my money?" Arturo blurted angrily.

He had a cash-only policy and it suited his clients perfectly 'cause they didn't want ties to him, either. No such thing as too many precautions in his line of work.

When there was no answer, he asked, "Murphy—you got my money?"

"Yeah . . . I got your—yeah, I got it," the voice replied, the tremulous hesitation putting Arturo on guard.

Something was wrong. Almost sounded like the dumb-ass didn't know what they were talking about. Or maybe he was stalling or on a fishing expedition—oh shit, had this idiot been flipped by somebody? Was the call being monitored?

"You sound spaced, Irish," Arturo said, letting scepticism and moderate disdain flow freely through his tone.

"Just, uh, just a little nervous, Arty."

Arty again. Goddamn. Was this jerk flying on something?

"But you do have my money?" Arturo asked. "All of it?"

Another damn pause. "Yeah, I got it." It was obvious that Murphy was thinking of something else. Bothered by something.

Arturo asked, "Got *all* of it, right?" Thinking: Don't trust anybody—if Murphy isn't playing him, he'll reiterate the amount. Unless something else is wrong.

"How much is 'all of it,' Irish?" Arturo asked, focusing, listening closely for some kind of tell—some flicker in speech or ill-timed clearing of the throat. Anything.

No answer.

"You hear me, Murphy?"

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"Look, I got your money but I gotta run now—I'll be back—"

"Gotta run?" Arturo shouted, sure now that he was being messed with, being screwed over or something. "What the hell you mean, you gotta run?"

Click. Dead line.

Jack dropped the remote handset on the couch, the plastic device bouncing once on the cushion and then tumbling off onto the living-room carpet—Jesus, sweet Jesus. " . . . the man's history," this Zuniga guy had said. And he wanted money. Thinks he's talking to some guy named Murphy. Jesus.

The phone lay on the champagne-colored "just have to have that shade" carpet his wife had picked out with her decorator—or Lifestyle Coordinator, as he liked to be called; slick black-haired dude with a goatee, liked to touch his female clients when he talked to them, and in a lingering fashion—*speaking of black:* The black phone seemed somehow sinister, deadly, lying there on the silky beige floor covering.

Don't be stupid, Hafner. He fought the obvious conclusion the conversation evoked and tried to think of alternatives. Couldn't it have been fairly innocent? Hell, car salesmen talked worse than that about customers—"taking their heads off," "tearing out their throats," "making a killing." Could be something like that, something that only sounded like—

Call the cops! A strident voice inside his head urged him.

Jack leaned forward over the handset and then stopped himself. Frowned. Peered at his own reaching hand, saw the trembling, felt his whole body shaking. *My God, I'm really frightened.*

All he'd been doing was having some fun, messing with some idiot couldn't get the right number and now he was in the middle of . . . what?

His mind shied back to the path he'd been on; he shook his head, thinking, *If I call the cops, what then? Tell them what?* Even if he quoted Arturo, there wasn't anything they could check on, especially since Zuniga lived over in the middle of Texas. Who was gonna check out some call from way over there?

He sighed heavily and shook his head some more. Started chewing on his lower lip, trying to come up with an explanation that didn't scare him so damn much—something other than what he really feared. He hurried over to the side bar and poured himself a good six fingers of bourbon, no ice. Goddamn frozen water takes up too much room in the glass, you don't drink it fast the ice melts and waters down the booze.

Gulping it now, a molten sensation as the liquor hotly drizzles down his insides. . . . He feels the sharp raised facets of the cut-glass tumbler under his fingers, hand trembling as he drinks,

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liquor dribbling down his chin, oddly cool on his skin while hot inside his throat, and now noticing more cool sensations from beaded sweat evaporating off his forehead.

Another belt can't hurt, pouring, nodding at the satisfying clink of the bottle neck against the glass tumbler. He swigged it down, eyes darting around the room as though he expected Arturo to materialize in the living room and start blazing away with a pair of forty-fives.

"The man's history."

Jack sighed, not wanting to accept the obvious. But . . . ah hell, you can't con a con man, even if it's yourself—Zuniga was a hit man all right, no question about it; no use trying to kid himself, go into some kind of denial or something. And the guy wanted his money. Might be on his way here right now, coming up from that dry-ass San Antonio to lush, green Denver—Oh yeah, that's helpful, a goddamn climate commentary—when Zuniga got here and found out he wasn't Murphy he wouldn't settle for *just* getting his money, he'd have to kill the imposter to cover his murdering Italian ass.

A frown on his face, not knowing why . . . then Jack realized that a question had arisen inside his head unbidden: *Is Zuniga an Italian name? Or Spanish?*

Yeah. Important distinction, Hafner. Like the climate.

A sustained sigh. He needed to gather his wandering speculations, forcibly herd his stray thoughts into some kind of coherent structure. If Zuniga was a hit man, then who had he killed? Somebody on the news? Senator or somebody? Probably a crooked office-holder, somebody got too close to the fire.

Jack tried to evoke his sense of humor: Hope it was a Democrat, some bleeding-heart liberal bastard maybe, one of those help-the-poor types, like his wife. Can't be a crime to kill a Democrat.

A shudder played upward along his spine. Why couldn't he see this as funny? It oughta be funny. *Goddamn me anyway, always with the practical jokes. Old man Burke was right—they'll be the death of me.*

He picked up the TV remote and pressed the sliding-panel button and the wall parted, exposing the screen, already lighting up. Jack surfed until he got CNN and some talking head wearing glasses and a supercilious expression, telling about the tragic accident of a political activist, some guy with strong Washington connections. Small plane down in the mountains near Telluride, witnesses hiking the summertime ski slope reported a flash of light and some smoke while it was still in the air.

Oh Christ—guy who put the bomb on board now has his phone number, matter of time before he has the address. Jack tossed back another shot of bourbon just as the phone rang.

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The chirping dark chunk of plastic seemed to mock him from the champagne carpet, loudly chortling like some kind of demented mechanical crow.

The phone rang four times before the answering machine switched on: same metallic voice as when Arturo had called before over the last three days.

". . . at the sound of the tone."

He said, "I know you're there, asshole, pick up the damn phone."

Faint sound of electronic pulses, barely audible white noise.

He punched in the numbers again and got the same response. And again . . .

Set the phone down and headed for the bathroom, blood rising under his skin all over his body. Hurrying now, near bursting—when he got angry he always had to go, couldn't handle a full bladder and a chest flooded with molten anger.

Cocoa-colored ceramic walls flashed by as he headed across the gleaming swirls of brown, gold, and beige making up the Spanish-tile floor. Mirrors everywhere, the heavy flawless type with beveled edges, kind they sell you by the square inch.

Finished, Arturo quickly spritzed his hands under the gold faucet and dried on a thick beige towel. Maybe a wrong number. But the guy had known about the job, about the big shot being history, and about the money. Had to be Murphy.

An hour later, having called a friend at Qwest, he had an address to go with the number Murphy had given him. A place on Live Oak Boulevard in Littleton, Colorado, suburb south of Denver. The town had been on the news a couple of years back but Arturo couldn't remember why.

He headed his Lexus four-wheeler north out of San Antonio toward Austin; he needed to get to Denver quickly but he wouldn't take a plane. No way. If it'd been intended for him to fly, he'd have feathers on his butt. His stomach roiled at the mere thought of boarding a plane.

The next evening the doorbell chimed and Jack peered out the window.

A cop shuffled in place under the portico's hanging light, apparently nervous about calling on a member of the upper class, Jack frowning through a gap in the music-room drapes.

Leah was out again, for the evening. Silver high heels and a slinky black dress, red bikini panties he'd seen just before she'd shimmied into the tight dress. Jack felt his marriage slipping away but didn't have it in him to care; she was probably bonking the decorator. A guy who shows you swatches, for Christ's sake.

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"Don't drive so goddamn fast in the neighborhood," he'd yelled after her.

She'd flipped him the bird—*Teach you that at Vassar?*—not looking back, door from the house to the garage swinging closed . . . roar of her Beemer as she tore out of the driveway and down the street.

And now he'd got this cop here.

He swung the front door open. "Yes?" Glancing up and down the quiet street, scanning for skulkers and would-be assassins.

"Could I step inside, Mr. Hafner?" the cop asked quietly, respectfully.

Jack frowned. What the hell is this? He hadn't called them about the phone call with the hit man. This cop serving an order to vacate? Well, it was *her* house.

Oh Christ! A setup.

Jack stepped back quickly, swinging the door to close it, sure this was Arturo from San Antonio impersonating a cop. Goddamn gun on his hip.

The cop reached out and stopped the door, stepped forward with his black boot in the way. "Sir, I need to talk with you . . . it's about your wife."

Jack frowned. "Tell me from out there," he whispered, not believing the guy.

After a couple of beats of hem-hawing, the cop said, "She was involved in a traffic accident, sir—I'm afraid she was killed."

Arturo Zuniga watched the cop at the door talking to the blond-haired man. The police officer had his arm outstretched, holding the door open, the man having tried to close it.

The cop spoke.

The man took a staggering step backward and then swayed for a moment, almost out of sight from the street. He seemed to ask something and the cop nodded. They talked for just a minute longer and the man nodded, closed the door, and the cop turned and headed back to his cruiser, parked half-in, half-out of a pool of glowing orange from the sodium-vapor streetlight, old-growth trees towering into darkness and marching away in a long queue down the center of the grassy boulevard bisecting the street.

Zuniga frowned, shaking his head.

The man in the house wasn't Murphy. The man was a complication.

"He killed her . . . as a warning or something," Jack said aloud to the empty foyer. His voice echoed down the tiled hall, seemingly bouncing off distant surfaces, the intensity of his voice diminishing as it got farther off, fading completely away.

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He headed for the side bar and poured a glass tumbler full of bourbon. Drank it down. Poured another.

A clock ticked impossibly loudly from off somewhere. . . . He could hear the faint murmur of a breeze passing under the roof of the portico, muffled sounds of crickets from outside.

Jack frowned. The son of a bitch must have run Leah off the road, making her crash into the bridge abutment. Instant death, the cop had said. Air bag useless at that speed, he'd said. Merciful, at least. He'd said.

Arturo popped the plastic interior-light cover and unscrewed the bulb, got out of the Lexus, and walked up the street toward the wide stone walk leading to the man's front door, the man who wasn't Murphy the go-between. He had to cross a side street and walk another block before coming to the end of the sloping walkway, standing there, gazing at the huge house: twenty-foot-high portico, six fluted columns, widow's walk railing at the roof line, huge black shutters at the tall windows. Big bucks.

He stretched, tight from tension after the long drive. Hefted his briefcase, feeling the weight of the thick dossier; background of the man he'd been hired to deal with, a man who himself was now history as far as his employer was concerned. In fact, to the client, the man had never existed.

Now, he needed to get paid.

The doorbell rang and Jack drunkenly padded on stocking feet down the hall and into the foyer. Had to be the cop coming back with details about where to get the body and such. Christ, couldn't they wait on that stuff?

Looked out through the curtain gap. Not the cop. Who the—

Christ! Guy in a brown Western suit with an alligator-hide briefcase, cowboy hat. Boots. Longish black hair showing below the hat. Hatchet face with the look of a—

Arturo Zuniga.

—hurriedly, nearly slipping and falling, Jack ran toward his study, pushed open the heavy carved wooden door, and crossed to his marble-topped desk. Set the glass down and jerked open a drawer, reached in and pulled out the Glock nine-millimeter. Racked the slide and the semiautomatic weapon was cocked.

Oh God, oh God, oh—silently, unsteadily, making his way back to the door, pausing to take a deep breath, then another, the gun clunking against the door from his lack of control, quickly lifting it up and away, pulling the door open.

The man under the outside light looked at the Glock pointing at his chest and frowned. "I'm the guy on the phone."

Jack shot him three times in a tight grouping at the sternum,

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kept firing in his general direction as the man fell backward off the large raised stoop onto the sidewalk, the briefcase springing open and papers spilling out over the night-blackened grass beside the walk, photo of a balding man in a tennis shirt. Beady eyes.

Off in the distance a dog started barking . . . then a couple of others joined in, closer by, lights coming on in a downstairs room in the huge brick house across the street.

The detective shook his head sadly. A thin, gangly man wearing a black suit. Oily dark-red hair, nearly maroon; looked like he should be dealing blackjack in Vegas. "That's some story, Mr. Hafner, but I'm afraid your imagination got the best of you—and since Zuniga wasn't armed or threatening you . . ."

And went on to explain how Zuniga had been what was referred to as a "hatchet man" in corporate circles. Hired by wealthy business owners to negotiate severance packages with contracted employees they wanted to get rid of; work out something that both parties could live with but that, of course, favored the employer. Zuniga had been hired by a Francis Murphy to negotiate with one of the lesser vice presidents of a Denver manufacturing firm—get him to leave without the golden parachute and to forgo stock options for a one-time release payment of six months' salary.

The cop saying, "He accomplished this with nude photos and an Internet-use record showing the vice president had been on child-porn sites—gets paid by cash because the execs don't want a paper trail from him to them, worried about reputations, I guess."

"The man's history."

Fired from his job, was all Zuniga had meant. Not killed, just fired.

And Leah's car wreck had been an accident. Witnessed. Anyway, Zuniga hadn't hit town yet when she'd crashed into the bridge abutment. She'd been drinking, giddy after an evening discussing Feng Shui or something, probably horizontally, heading home with the pedal to the metal in defiance of her husband's admonitions regarding fast driving.

Jack thought back to when he'd first scrolled through the Caller ID record, how he'd begun instantly to think of some way to jack the caller around, screw with his head . . . just to glean a little fun out of an otherwise harmless mistake. A little innocent kidding.

The cop leaned back in his chair, steepled his fingers over his chest. Stared.

"Arturo Zuniga wasn't a nice man, I'll admit, but he hadn't broken the law," the cop said, a wry set to his mouth. With a gentle nod of his head he added, "But, Mr. Hafner, I'm afraid you have." ●

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PROCEDURE

by Adrian Magson

England's Adrian Magson writes for various mainstream magazines in the U.K. and overseas, and is a columnist for *Writers' News/Writing Magazine.* We welcome him not only to *EQMM* but to the world of crime fiction this month—his previous fiction credits have been with women's magazines, under the pseudonym Ellen Cleary. Mr. Magson's first crime novel *No Peace for the Wicked* (Crème de la Crime) is due out in late 2004.

They smash through my front door at three in the morning. Two of them, dressed in black. The first—Patrick—is carrying a council curbstone he probably found lying around somewhere, and which he uses to tap the lock out of the frame. He uses his other hand to turn on the lights and throw a small side table along the hall. He does things like that to show how big and strong he is. People rarely argue with him.

The second man is tall, slim, and black as night, with shiny dreadlocks hanging around his shoulders. He has a blowtorch in one hand and a Bic lighter in the other. Hooper. He strides catlike to the foot of my bed and thumbs the lighter. The flame snaps the blowtorch into a steady, icy-blue tongue of fire which hisses like a dragon in the silence. I can feel the heat from six feet away. Hooper smiles.

I hope it's a social call. Hooper is so far off the wall even the Yardies threw him out for being too violent. Now here he is in my bedroom.

"I suppose knocking's too much to ask?" I say. I don't know these two all that well, but I've heard it's best not to back down too quick. They respect that, for some insane reason.

Patrick drops the curbstone on the bed and jerks a massive thumb towards the door. "The Chairman wants to see you."

"It's three in the morning," I point out.

The flame comes nearer as Hooper advances round the bed.

"I'll get dressed."

I hop around looking for socks and stuff while Patrick watches

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and Hooper plays the flame of his toy across a glass-fronted picture of a Paris street scene. It was a present from a former girlfriend who thought I needed cultural improvement. For some reason, she thought I was artistically bland. She didn't last long after that, but the picture stayed. I like it, actually. Very . . . moody.

The glass pops and cracks while I pull on my shoes, and I figure I'll get Hooper back for that. One day when he isn't looking.

"What does he want?" I ask conversationally as we drive west towards the Chairman's office. We're in a black Toyota Land Cruiser, which is inappropriate for the city, but Patrick needs a big vehicle, otherwise he'd have nowhere to keep his collection of curbstones.

"He's got a job for you." Hooper turns round in the passenger seat and stares at me. "Gainful employment." The words come out slow and singsong, and a gold tooth glints in his mouth, reflecting the streetlights. I reckon he's pissed I didn't put up a fight.

"I've already got a job," I tell him. I do, too. I deliver things for people. Small packages, mostly; papers, diskettes, certificates, contracts, that sort of thing. Anything small, light, and of high-value importance. You want it there, I'm your man. Guaranteed. Not drugs, though. I don't touch drugs. I'm old-fashioned about wanting to keep my freedom.

Hooper sneers. "Courier shit, man? Don't make me laugh. That's for pussies."

I debate shoving Hooper's gold tooth down his throat, but decide it will keep. Patrick would probably take a spare curbstone out of his top pocket and cuff me with it.

Instead I sit back and ignore them both, and consider what I'm about to get into.

The Chairman—if he has a real name nobody uses it—is a fat slug who runs a business and criminal empire said to stretch across half of Europe. Some say he's Dutch, and was kicked out of Rotterdam because he gave the local crims a bad name. He set himself up in London instead and proceeded to knock out every other syndicate in the place, allowing only a tiny network of small-time gangs to remain. It was a clever move; in return for letting them be, he allows them to tender for doing his dirty work. He has a small group of direct employees—people like Hooper and Patrick, to protect his back from anyone who thinks he might be easy meat—but other than that, he believes in lean and mean. Especially mean.

Like I say, clever move. He controls the whole criminal shebang, while letting some of the dumber members think they're important. It's a franchise, only the penalties for infringing the rules are more permanent.

I've done a couple of jobs for the Chairman before, but only out

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of desperation. They were simple fetch-and-carry assignments, the main risk being if I failed to deliver. I didn't enjoy them because I didn't feel clean afterwards, and the last time he'd called, which was about a month ago, I'd declined. Politely.

I wish I had Malcolm with me.

Malcolm's my little brother. I use the word little only in the age sense; he's three years younger than me, but way, way bigger. He caught our grandfather's bit of the gene pool, while I've been blessed with Grandma's. Granddad—a rough, tough stevedore back in the days when they still had them—was apparently a shade under six-ten, with shoulders and hands to match, while Grandma was normal.

At six-eight, and weighing in at two fifty, Malcolm can pick me up with one hand. He's also good-looking, with twin rows of pearly-white teeth, naturally swarthy skin, and eyes which can bore right through you. Apparently it works wonders with the girls and means he never gets to go home alone.

The downside is, he's disturbingly honest, and has never been known to tell a lie or get in a fight. At school, he was left well alone from an early age, especially when they saw how much he could lift with one hand. And if anyone gave me grief, all I had to do was mention his name and I got swift apologies and a promise of immunity from the scummies who liked to prey on smaller kids for their lunch money. Not great for my self-esteem, but if you went to the sort of school I went to, you used whatever means you had to keep afloat, even if it was your kid brother.

As the Americans say, go figure.

The Chairman's office is in a smart, glass-fronted block in the West End, rubbing shoulders with a team of showbiz lawyers on one side and a well-known film company on the other. Like many top crims, the Chairman believes respectability comes from who you know, not what you do.

We troop upstairs with me sandwiched in the middle, through a set of armoured-glass doors into a plush foyer with carpets like a grass savanna. An office at one end has the lights on and the door open.

"Ah, there you are, Stephen," the Chairman says, like we're old buddies. His English is faultless. He's studying some spreadsheets under a desk lamp and hitting the keyboard of a Compaq with quick fingers, like the accountant he's rumoured to have been before he went sly. "Sit down. Coffee?"

The offer and the first-name familiarity are all part of the game of being in charge. Patrick pours me a coffee from a jug in one corner and hands me the cup. It looks like a thimble in his hand.

"I'd prefer to be home in bed," I say tiredly. "Without the curbstone for company."

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The Chairman looks up from his figures and seeks out Patrick with a look of reproof. "Say what? Have you been using those things again? Patrick, didn't I tell you there are people you don't need them for? Mr. Connelly, here, is one of them." He shakes his head the way you would with a small child. "You'd better get the door repaired."

"Okay," Patrick mutters, totally unconcerned. "I'll do it tomorrow."

"No, you'll do it now. Wake someone." He says it nice and soft, while tapping away on the keyboard once more, but there's suddenly a chill in the air.

Patrick lumbers out, leaving Hooper to watch over me.

"How's that's nice brother of yours?" The Chairman sits back and smiles. Like he cares. If he ever met Malcolm, it must have been by accident.

"He's fine," I say, and wonder where this is leading. Malcolm doesn't approve of my life, other than agreeing to the occasional meal round my flat when he's up in London. He thinks all criminals should be locked up, sometimes me included. It's not that I do anything overtly illegal, but he thinks anyone who doesn't use Her Majesty's Post Office to send letters and stuff must be pulling some serious strokes, and by association, I'm tainted by their guilt.

"Good. And your Auntie Ellen. How's her husband—is he any better?"

Now I'm seriously worried. Nobody knows about Auntie Ellen or Uncle Howard, for the simple reason that they live down in Devon and I don't talk about them. A nicer pair of old folks you'll never meet, and I owe them a lot. They were instrumental in our upbringing after our parents died when Malcolm and I were kids.

"Say again?"

"Oh, come now." The Chairman picks up a photo from his desk and shows it to me. It's a shot of a familiar white-haired old lady in her garden, innocently pruning her roses. In the background, made fuzzy by the distance but still recognisable, is the gangly figure of Uncle Howard. I can't see what he's doing, but it looks like he's talking to himself. He does a lot of that, bless him. Early Alzheimer's, according to the doctors. "I know all about your family, Stephen. Your aunt and your loopy uncle. I make it my business, you know that. It gives me leverage. If I need it."

The last four words are uttered with meaning, and there's no misunderstanding; he needs leverage now. It's still in me to try, though.

"And if I don't want the job?"

He shrugs and drops the photo in the bin. "Then you're short one aunt and uncle and the county of Devon is a sadder place." He picks up a large manilla envelope and flicks it across the desk. "I want that to arrive in Brussels first flight this morning. Kill another passenger for their seat if you have to, but get it there."

"Why not use Hooper or Patrick?"

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He winces with impatience and I get a cool chill across my shoulders. "If I could use them, I would," he says, as if he's talking to a particularly dumb child. "I'm using you."

"For a simple delivery? What's inside—pictures of the prime minister? Funny money?"

He leans forward into the lamplight and I can see he's got a bead of sweat across his brow. Only I don't think it's the heat. "You refused me once before, Stephen. I don't like that; it undermines my reputation. You understand about reputations, don't you?" He sits back, suddenly aware that Hooper's watching him now, not me. Men like Hooper are always on the lookout for chinks in the armour, and there's no bigger chink than a boss who shows signs of letting a minor problem get under his skin. Loyalty in his world is a commodity, and can be sold. "There's a rumour going round that you won't work for me." He waves a dismissive hand. "Frankly, I don't care if it's true or not—and in any case, as you can see, it's both false and at the same time, useful." He smiles coldly. "Ring me the moment you complete. Be back here afterwards to collect a payment. No handover or no return here by three at the latest and Hooper gets to play with his blowtorch in sunny Devon."

I pick up the envelope as the Chairman goes back to his computer, and turn to find Hooper watching me with dangerous intensity. He's hoping I'll fail.

Outside, I breathe deeply and search for a cab. Eventually I pick up one going my way and get back long enough to have a shower, make one important phone call, throw on some respectable clothes, and dig out my passport. Then it's off to the airport to wait for a plane and blag a ticket.

Brussels airport is all aluminum and zero atmosphere, and there are few people at Arrivals save for a couple of cleaners, a man with a bunch of flowers, and a fat, sweaty individual in a green suit. This last one is carrying a section of brown cardboard with the name Bouillon scrawled across it in large, black letters, and is staring at me with a look of deep melancholy.

I check my instructions and the name matches. When I look up, he's waddling away fast, his green jacket flapping in the breeze like an elephant's ears.

"Hey—" I go after him, but the man has a head start and leaves me behind, in spite of his size. What the hell is this?

It's only when I get a prickly feeling in the back of my neck and turn round that I realise I'm being followed by two men. One of them is the man with the flowers.

Shit, as we say in the courier business. This doesn't look good.

I stuff the envelope in my pocket and go after Green Suit. I don't know what his problem is, or what the envelope holds which is so

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important he's being tagged by two men. But I really don't want to get left holding it and have Hooper go after Auntie Ellen just because of some local territorial disagreement by a bunch of Walloons.

Running is out of the question; nobody runs in airports anymore, not unless they want to be brought down by a burly security guard and have a Heckler & Koch stuck in their ear.

I settle for a fast walk, with occasional snatches at my watch, like I'm late for a meeting. Behind me, the two men have split up and veered off at angles, no doubt so as not to appear on the same security monitors as me. One man hurrying, fine; three men hurrying, cause for alarm.

I end up out by the taxi rank, and catch a glimpse of Green Suit across the road, panting his way up the stairs to the upper levels of the multistorey. The place is bedlam, as usual, with taxis and cars streaking by without paying too much attention to the pedestrian crossing, but I risk it and race across after him. I leave a trail of burnt rubber and angry horn blasts in my wake, but at least I make it.

I hit the top level to find him about to squeeze his way into a tan Mercedes.

"What," I gasp, throat dry, "is your pigging problem?"

For some reason he looks puzzled, then scared. "Okay," he hisses. "Give it to me!"

Okay? Like he's doing me a favour? Now there are certain formalities we go through in this business, like exchanging IDs. It's not been unknown to have someone turn up for a collection who shouldn't, if you know what I mean. And with Hooper and Patrick waiting to take a trip to Devon and perform industrial injury on two lovely old people, there's no way I'm handing over this envelope to an unknown, two others in hot pursuit or not.

He huffs and puffs but hands over a business card. It confirms his name and I give him the envelope. Moments later, he's heading for the down ramp.

As I walk back down the stairs, I get out my mobile and dial a number.

"Yes?" It's the Chairman. There are voices and the sound of glasses clinking in the background. Must be a breakfast meeting in gangland.

"Delivered," I tell him. Then I see the two men at the bottom of the stairs. I show them my empty hands and they turn away as if deciding to cut their losses. "There seems to be some local interest, though."

"Local interest?" The Chairman sounds bored. "What sort of interest?"

I tell him about the two men, and the enraged bellow begins to

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build the moment I say I handed the envelope to Green Suit. "You what?" he snarls. "Bouillon's tall and thin, you idiot! That was the wrong man! You've just handed over some priceless documents to the wrong person!"

There's more along those lines, but I'm no longer listening. Something doesn't sound right. How did he know my Bouillon wasn't tall and thin? I hadn't mentioned it.

Then it hits me. I've been set up. No wonder Bouillon was puzzled; I wasn't supposed to catch him. And the other two were merely for show. It means the Chairman hasn't forgotten my first refusal; in fact, he's found a way to use me as an example to others and salvage his dented pride. There was no handover, and I'm willing to bet his tirade just now was within earshot of some influential people he was looking to impress. Or frighten.

I dial another number. Malcolm answers.

"They okay?" I ask him.

"Fine," he replies. "We're having breakfast. Nice hotel in—"

"Don't tell me," I instruct him. "Walls have ears."

Malcolm laughs. It's a game to him; a silly, ludicrous game in which he's indulging me. He doesn't know the Chairman like I do. I'd asked him to take Aunt Ellen and Uncle Howard out for the day, starting with an early breakfast somewhere swish and booking them into a nice, quiet hotel away from home. At short notice, it was the only thing I could think of.

I travel back to London with a feeling of dread. If I call Malcolm again and warn him that Hooper and Patrick could be on their way down, he'll either think I'm lying or panic and call the cops. To him, the seamier side of life is what you read about in the papers. The best I can do is hope he keeps their heads down, wherever they are.

I'm halfway back to London along the M4 when he rings me. He doesn't sound happy.

"It's Uncle Howard," he says. "He's gone for a walk."

"Great," I tell him. "Get him back." Then I realise what he's saying. Uncle Howard has reached the stage where he's virtually forgotten everyone he knows and where he lives, and "going for a walk" means he's wandered off. He could be anywhere.

"Shit, Malc," I shout. "How the hell did you let that happen?"

"He went to the loo. I thought it was okay—he's done it okay before and always come back. This time he didn't. The hotel receptionist said she saw him walking towards Piccadilly."

I feel a set of cold fingers clutch my guts. "You said where?"

"Piccadilly, in London. You said take them out, so I thought a day in London . . ."

I want to shout and scream at him, and tell him what a stupid, naive great pillock he is. But it's no use. It's not his fault—it's mine. Then I consider it. There's as much chance of them hiding

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successfully in the Smoke as anywhere else. Better, in fact. Just as long as they don't happen to walk past a certain office block in the West End just as the Chairman comes out.

"Okay," I say calmly. "You did good, Malc. Can you leave Ellen there and go look for him? I'll be with you as soon as I can."

He gives me the name of the hotel and I cut the connection. I have to get to the Chairman and get him to pull his dogs off. I don't know what I'll have to do, but there must be a way.

The Chairman is out and his secretary doesn't know when he'll be back. She won't ring him, either. There's no sign of Hooper or Patrick.

I drive along to Piccadilly and find the hotel where Malcolm has holed up with Aunt Ellen. It's small and posh and they'll have thought it beats the Savoy hands down.

Aunt Ellen answers when I call on the house phone. Malcolm has just called to say he's found Uncle Howard and they're on their way back to the hotel. I breathe a sigh of relief and tell her to stay where she is, then go downstairs to meet them.

Hooper is standing on the pavement, flicking his cigarette lighter.

He looks totally incongruous in that setting, and the hotel doorman is eyeing him with definite concern.

The Land Cruiser is at the curb behind him, with Patrick in the driver's seat. In the back sits the crumpled figure of Uncle Howard. Alongside him, Malcolm fills the other seat, looking drawn and pale and seemingly asleep.

"Hey, man," says Hooper, grinning, his speech a deliberate Caribbean drawl. He normally talks straight London. "Guess who we foun' walkin' long the street jus' now. I say to Patrick, I say, 'Man, doesn't that look like Mr. Connelly's big brother and his daffy uncle?' An' sure enough, it is."

As I begin to move, he steps in my way, a hand on my chest. In the car, Patrick is leaning back, his hand alarmingly close to Uncle Howard's windpipe. He could snap it in an instant, the move says.

"What say we go for a ride?" says Hooper, dropping the drawl. He stands aside and I climb in alongside Patrick. Hooper slides in next to Uncle Howard, who smiles in a friendly, vague manner and doesn't know me from a tent peg. To him, it's all part of another day. Malcolm is breathing heavily and has a large bruise on the side of his handsome face.

The Land Cruiser blasts off and we twist and turn through the streets towards Paddington. In minutes we're running alongside some railway arches and pull up at one with large double doors. The rest of the street is deserted save for a mangy dog and two kids on bikes. At a look from Hooper, all three disappear.

We're bundled inside and the doors close. We're in some sort of workshop, the air thick with the smell of oil, grease, and burned metal, the floor littered with scrap paper, fag ends, and small twists

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of shaved metal, iron filings, the lot. On one wall is a storage rack full of lengths of steel, like giant knitting needles, and around the other walls is a collection of benches and machines, the use of which I can only guess at. Metalwork wasn't really my subject at school.

Hooper produces a blowtorch and fires it up while Patrick looks on, holding a length of half-inch steel rod.

Uncle Howard is staring at everyone in turn, not alarmed, merely curious. His gentle eyes alight on a metal lathe in one corner, and he smiles in vague recognition. He used to work in a factory years before. He probably feels comfortable in this sort of place.

I look at Malcolm slumped against one wall, wishing him awake. If there's anyone who can help us it's Malcolm, with his enormous shoulders and powerful hands. Only I know he won't. Big as he is, he's got as much aggression in him as a cotton bud.

Hooper steps across to Uncle Howard and shows him the blowtorch. The old man looks at the cold blue flame hissing away in front of him with a half frown, and I wonder if the confused and tangled brain cells inside his head can still recognise danger.

I'm standing alongside a workbench. It's clear, apart from one of those old pump-handled oil cans with a long nozzle. I reach out and bang my hand on the pump. Nothing. Hooper laughs and Patrick looks at me in disgust, as if he'd expected it. He starts towards me with his steel rod, and I guess he's been waiting for something like this so he can have some fun.

I pump again and a jet of oil spits out and catches Hooper square in the face. It slicks across his cheeks, a thick, glutinous stain, and enters his eyes. He blinks, or tries to. Then he swears ferociously and tries to wipe it away. It just makes things worse.

By now Patrick is building up speed, the steel rod whistling through the air towards me. Only he's forgotten what workshops are like. He's forgotten the electric chain pulley for lifting the metal into position at the machines; he's forgotten the power lines that scatter the air in a tangle above our heads.

The tip of the rod is supposed to connect to my head. Instead, it hits the engine casing of the chain pulley with a dull, heavy thud, and travelling with the full force of Patrick's shoulder. The shock goes up the rod and into his arm, and pain registers on his face. Nerveless fingers can't hold on to the weapon, and it falls to the ground.

I don't waste time scooping it up; I grab the nearest piece of hanging chain and throw my body to one side, using my weight to pull as hard as I can. For a nanosecond the chain pulley doesn't want to move. Then it goes and gathers momentum and rumbles along its greased track above me. I can feel the weight carrying it along as I let go of the chain, the heavy links clanking together as they swing through the air. On the end of the chain is a giant steel

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hook which gets momentarily left behind.

Hooper is too busy swearing and trying to scrape oil out of his eyes to notice what I've done, and looks for Uncle Howard, the blowtorch coming round . . .

But Uncle Howard isn't there. Somewhere deep in the recesses of his damaged brain is a reflex which tells him from his years in a factory that he has to move; that with heavy machinery in a noisy workshop, not all warnings can be heard and you have to have eyes in the back of your head. In spite of his age and condition, his upper body sways like a boxer, moving just enough to avoid the deadly slingshot rush of the heavy hook as it tries to catch up with the engine block.

It swishes harmlessly past him and hits Hooper dead square. In the split second before impact, the Yardie's eyes seem to clear of oil and he sees what is about to hit him. But it's too late and he's gone, swept aside with a brief, soggy smack and tossed lifeless into a corner.

Patrick is snarling, trying to ignore the pain of his nerveless fingers. He picks up the steel rod with his other hand.

But this time there's an added complication: Malcolm has finally come to, and he rises up and stands in front of him like his own reflection. For the first time Patrick seems to realise he isn't the only big man in the world.

He whips the rod round in a scything arc, and I wait and wonder, because Malcolm has never had a fight in his life. He's never had to and he doesn't know how. For him, fighting is pointless.

But maybe he inherited something else from our stevedore grandfather. Like instinct. With no more effort than catching a fly, he opens his hand and takes the rod, the sound a dull smack in the silence. Patrick looks stunned and tries to pull it clear. Malcolm pulls back, only harder. As Patrick hurls towards him, my big brother steps forward and puts out his elbow, catching him under the chin with a dull crack. Patrick flies backwards then stands still, eyes filling with what looks like unimaginable pain and surprise.

When he doesn't move after that, and his head droops forward over his chest, I go for a look-see. Patrick is impaled on a length of mild steel sticking out of the storage rack. I turn to look at Malcolm, but he's fainted dead away, unaware of what he's done.

Later that night, I open the door to the Chairman's office. The building is deserted and I've got Patrick's keys to let me in. I'm wearing gloves and a floppy hat pulled over my face just in case the security cameras are loaded.

He's sitting at his desk, pounding keys. He's like a fat spider, counting his worth, and I know that what he wanted his men to do to me and Uncle Howard was no more than another accounting

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principle, a bookkeeping procedure. It's not personal, because I don't think revenge is a concept he knows. I turned him down, which offended him, and had to be seen to suffer the consequences. To him, it's part of the business.

And that's why I can't let this go. Because when he finds out about Patrick and Hooper, and how they failed to punish one old man or one old lady, he won't stop. It won't be because of his men—he doesn't see them as anything more than tools—but because of his twisted sense of pride. He'll simply order someone else—someone I don't know, most likely from one of the gangs—to complete the job instead. Procedure.

I snick the door shut and leave the building. Behind me, the Chairman has hosted his last meeting. He's sitting at his desk, and clutched in his pudgy fingers is a small twist of dark, shiny dreadlock. It's not much, but sufficient to show signs of a struggle.

They won't find Hooper, of course. Well, not for a while, anyway. And when they do, they'll find Patrick, his fingerprints on the hook which killed his Yardie colleague. The scattering of white powder and money on the floor will do the rest.

As for Malcolm, he'll forget about it in time. There was a scrap, he intervened, and we left. Who knows what happened to the bad men?

After all, thieves fall out. They're known for it. ●

GANGSTER WRAP

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Art by Mark Evan Walker

HEN PARTY

by Neil Schofield

What I'm going to do is this: I'm going to lie here for a bit on the sofa with my glass of scotch and think for a bit. That's all I have to do for the moment. I'm thinking back to a day—almost exactly a year ago—when we were all together for the last time, Doug, Harry, Bill, and me. It was a balmy summer day, with a blue, blue sky with just a few little skeins of cloud here and there and the gentlest of summer breezes whiffling in the trees. And we were all sitting around the remains of the barbeque at Doug's house. The wives had left, half an hour before. Suzanne, Doug's wife, a superb, but I really mean *superb* blonde on the classic Hollywood pattern, had stood up and said, "All right, girls."

And with a single movement, the other three had got up in formation. It was as though they were all radio-controlled and operating on the same frequency.

Caroline looked at me, and said, "Don't drink too much, Tom." I flapped a lazy hand at her.

And then they were off, the four of them, across the lawn, across the avenue to Bill's house. And there we were, wives on one side of

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the road, us on the other. If I think really carefully about that afternoon, it's Doug I remember most clearly.

Doug

"What the hell do you suppose they're doing over there?" said Doug. He's dead now, poor old Doug, crushed under his beloved Facel Vega one afternoon when he was working on it and the jack failed. Suzanne came back from a bridge game with the other wives and found him in the garage lying under those two tons of car. But on this afternoon I'm talking about, which is exactly a year ago, he was still very alive, pouring himself yet another brandy and looking rather sourly across the avenue towards Bill's house.

Neil Schofield currently turns his satirical eye on his native country from a little distance; for the past few years he's lived in France, where he finds he has a better perspective on his countrymen and their habits. In this new tale we should perhaps says it is his country*women* who come under caustic scrutiny. That and the life of the aspiring middle class. Mr. Schofield is a former finalist in the *EQMM* Readers Award competition. †

It was a quiet summer Sunday afternoon in Greenacres. I don't know if you know Greenacres, probably not. It's the sort of place which was made for quiet summer Sunday afternoons. It's not a suburb, Greenacres; it's more of an enclave. Far enough from London to keep it quiet, near enough to make it easy to get up there. If you have to. We don't often have to, Harry, Doug, Bill, and me. We've got things sufficiently under control not to have to.

Greenacres is a sort of staging post for those, like Harry, Doug, Bill, and me, who are not seriously rich enough to warrant the giant domains you find further down the Thames Valley. We're taking a breather, you might say, before moving up to the next rung. All the same, in Greenacres, you won't find a house going for much under half a million quid.

Here's the sort of place it is: On a Sunday afternoon in Greenacres, you don't hear lawn mowers or the hiss of hoses. Why not? Because all that's been taken care of during the working week by working people who take care of all that annoying business of lawn mowing and car washing for us. So that our Sundays are left mower-free and car-washingless for us to concentrate on living. Living, which in most cases means lunching.

Were there ever two words that fit together so beautifully as Sunday and Lunch? Sunday and Lunch, in our case, means, in the summer, a barbeque at one of our houses. And on this occasion, the one I'm concerned with, and to be honest, still very concerned

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with, was at Doug's house.

Doug and Harry and Bill and I take it in turns most weeks, when the weather is clement, to host a lunch al fresco. And I must say that Doug had done us proud. He has a double-size barbeque on which he had cooked first lobster *en papillote,* delightfully prepared by Mrs. Evans, his cook-housekeeper, and then *tournedos Rossini,* each steak delivered on its slice of fried bread, topped with a layer of foie gras, and accompanied by baked potatoes whose consistency was to dream about, and a selection of fresh vegetables.

During the meal, served on the lawn, Caroline, my wife, had eyed me in a very particular way which said, quite clearly, that we weren't yet up to scratch in this area.

"Isn't this wonderful, Tom?" she had trilled at me and I sighed. I knew that I would be searching in the next week for double-size barbeques and importers of Pacific prawns. *Keep up,* she was saying to me.

But that was earlier. Now, in the middle of the afternoon, wifeless and listless, we were at the stage where if you're going to go on drinking, and we certainly were, Doug, Harry, Bill, and I, well, you've got a problem about what. Do you go on with the wine, which can get pretty heavy at four in the afternoon, or do you switch to alcohol and the hell with it. So we'd switched to brandy under the pretence that it was a *digestif.* Except for me. I had started unashamedly on the scotch. I like a drop of scotch and everyone knows it. And the hell with Caroline.

"What the hell do you suppose they're doing across there?" Doug asked again. He was looking across the avenue towards Bill's house, where our four wives had gone after lunch. We all looked across Doug's lawn, which is expansive, followed by the avenue, which is wide, then across Bill's lawn, which is the same size as Doug's, so we were looking a fair distance, say a hundred yards, but we had a pretty good view. They were sitting in Bill's sitting room, in front of the enormous picture window, huddled in a group, talking seriously, but every so often there would be the occasional burst of laughter which we couldn't hear, but it was pretty obvious that they were laughing from the way they threw themselves about. I could even make out Caroline putting her hand over her mouth, which she inevitably does whenever she's screeching with laughter.

"And what the hell can they be talking about that's so funny?" Doug said.

Harry said, "In my experience, Doug, even if they told you, which they certainly won't, you wouldn't understand it. So don't sweat it."

Bill said, "Come on, Doug, siddown. Who cares anyway?"

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And I said, just to get my four penn'orth in, "It's probably dirty anyway."

"That's right," Bill backed me up, "women are much worse than men when it comes to dirty talk."

"Ever been in a women's toilet?" asked Harry. "The things they write on the walls would curl your hair. Much worse than the men's toilet."

"When were you in a women's toilet?" Bill asked, interested.

"When the Footsie lost two hundred points last Thursday morning," said Harry, "everyone had to go to the john. And there are only so many stalls in the men's room."

Harry worked on one of the biggest trading floors in the City. You wouldn't think it to look at him, but I'd been told by those who know that he was one of the hottest tickets around. The face of a choirboy and the instincts of a wolverine. Even lately, with the markets in free fall, he'd been holding his own. I knew that because he hadn't cancelled the top-of-the-range BMW he had ordered from me two months before.

Doug stopped looking across the road and came back to the large rustic table where we were and sat down.

"I hate it when women talk dirty," he said. I looked at him. He was an odd one, Doug. He was the same age as me—in fact, the same age as all of us, give or take a year or two—around forty-five, but he gave the impression of being older. He was stocky, broad-built, with a blocky face and steel-grey hair, sort of crispy. He looked like what he was—a man who had done heavy work in his life before he found a way to build a house and sell it himself instead of building other people's houses for them. And now he had that sixty-four-house development going up over near Basingstoke. I had an idea that when that development was finished we wouldn't see Doug for dust. He'd be off to buy one of those million-pound *faux-manoir* estates that we, or at least our wives, all drooled over. And I wouldn't even get a new car order out of him. He'd be off to the Rolls-Royce dealership in Guildford. Well, that didn't work out. But then, so many things don't.

Bill said, "Doug, look around you. Here we are, it's a beautiful, sunny, dreamy late afternoon in Greenacres. We've had a wonderful meal. The Great Unwashed are not yet at the gates wanting to burn our houses down. Our beautiful wives are across the road, so we don't even have to worry about entertaining them. Life is good. Enjoy. Relax."

So Doug sat down with the rest of us. And there we sat. In silence. Four men, approaching middle age, who didn't, if we're honest, have a thing to say to each other once we'd exhausted the usual male banter. If it hadn't been for the wives, I doubt we'd ever have formed even the most distant of acquaintances. But as

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so often in places like Greenacres, it's the wives that form the bonds, and we go along. I helped myself to another scotch, I remember.

I'd like another scotch now, as a matter of fact, but I just haven't the energy to get up. The house is very quiet now, just the occasional purr of an appliance, the central heating, the refrigerator kicking in now and then, and the sound of the odd car passing down the avenue. There's not a lot of traffic on the avenue and what there is is expensive and quiet. There's especially little on a Sunday. Like that Sunday when

Harry

that's right . . . when Harry said, "Perhaps it's a Tupperware party." Harry's dead now—him, too—three months after Doug. Tripped over that enormous cat that Tricia doted on. She came back from her night out with the other wives, did Tricia, and found him at the bottom of that enormous staircase, with his neck broken. The cat was dead, too.

But on this afternoon I'm thinking about, Harry was still alive and so was the cat.

"A what?" asked Doug, disbelievingly, "A what did you say?"

"A Tupperware party," said Harry defensively. "They happen."

"Tupperware," said Doug, still incredulous. "Okay, hands up all those whose wives spend enough time in the kitchen to *have* any leftovers to put in the bloody Tupperware."

Our hands remained clasped around our glasses.

Doug said, "Right. On to the next stupid comment."

Harry looked a little down. I felt sorry for him. I tried to lighten things up a little.

"Okay," I said, "maybe it's one of those Ann Summers things."

"What's an Ann Summers thing?" asked Bill.

"You know," I said, "where they model sexy underwear—panties with split crotches, stuff like that. And appliances," I said.

Bill looked incredulous. I suppose that if you live with your head in a cloud of bytes and bits all day you don't have much time for the outside world and its grubbier antics.

Harry merely nodded. He knew.

Doug, if it were possible, looked even more sour. He took a large bite from his brandy.

"Ann Summers," he said, in the same way he'd said "Tupperware." "Okay, hands up all those who spend enough time in the bedroom for their wives to need stuff like that."

This was dodgy territory and we all knew it.

He looked round at us.

"Okay. This is how it goes, all right? You get up at six, you drive thirty miles to work and spend fourteen hours sorting out all the

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shit that has accumulated since the last time you were there. You maybe have time for a drink on the way home, you get home at nine, you eat, and you fall asleep. And that's the way it is, seven days out of seven. Go ahead, tell me I'm wrong."

He wasn't wrong, and we all knew it. That's the way it was.

"That's the way it is," said Doug, "and anybody who says it isn't is a liar. Hands up anyone who has made love to his wife within—let's take a low figure—the last month."

No hands went up.

"Okay," Doug said, "so don't let's have any more of this Ann Summers crap."

Bill said suddenly, "How old is your wife, Doug?"

Doug sat up. "What the hell does that have to do with anything?" he said.

Bill shrugged. "Nothing," he said, "just interested, that's all."

Doug seemed to decide that there was no trap in the question and subsided.

"Thirty-two," he said.

Bill turned to me. "Tom?" he said.

I thought about it, and took a low figure. "Caro's thirty," I said. "She'll be thirty-one in October."

Harry said musingly, "Tricia's twenty-nine."

Bill nodded. "About the same age as Melanie," he said. He pushed his glasses up on that pudgy little nose and sipped his brandy. His face had taken on a sort of inward-turned look, as if he were doing some sort of calculation. Very gifted for that sort of thing, was our Bill. At sixteen he'd been a sort of infant prodigy, creating a revolutionary kind of video game on the cutting-edge computer his parents had given him for his fifteenth. At eighteen he'd been hired by one of the software monsters, but he found that too restricting, left to found his own software shop. He'd invented some sort of digital doohickey that all the world fell over themselves to buy, he'd sold the licences, and at thirty he had been on the way to being rich. Since then he had consolidated things, regularly turned out new software products, and taken on a lot of staff. He'd told me recently that he was on the verge of some sort of giant breakthrough. He'd explained what it was, but I didn't understand it. I believed him, but I didn't understand it.

So, four rather pudgy men in our forties, we sat and thought for a bit. I don't know what we thought about exactly, perhaps about the fact that we were all at least fifteen years older than our wives, and why was that?

I suppose we had all put it off for too long, the getting married, the settling down and founding a dynasty business. Too busy, too intent even to think about it. I knew I was leaving it too long, but when you're climbing up the dealership ladder, you're pretty pre-

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occupied. By the time I had the two BMW franchises, it was pretty late. I know most men manage to do it, but there we were, presented for your inspection, four men who had reached the age of forty or thereabouts, looked around, and realised, *Hey, aren't I supposed to be married? Isn't that how it goes?* And so we all had. And with enough money to attract the right sort of female we had all married, not trophy wives—I'm not saying that—but the sort of woman who is beautiful, knows it, and demands and needs exactly the right sort of expensive setting to flourish in. The sort of setting that men like us were willing and ready to provide.

Now, don't get me wrong, it's not that we didn't love our wives. Far from it. I knew for a fact that Doug took on Mrs. Evans so that Suzanne would never have to lift a finger; Harry took Tricia to the south of France every year, or sent her, rather, since he found it difficult to leave the trading floor, especially in those rocky times; Bill gave Melanie free rein at Harrods; and for her last birthday, I had given Caroline the Japanese cabriolet she'd been pining after for so long. So you couldn't say we didn't love them, could you?

No, you couldn't say that.

Bill

Bill said, "It's probably just a sort of hen party." Bill died, too, the little software nerd. Just nine weeks after Harry, as it happened. Melanie came home one night after a girls' night out with the other wives and found him in the bathroom. Evidently he'd slipped on the soap and cracked his skull on the side of the bath. That hadn't killed him outright, but he'd fallen facedown in the bath and drowned in nine inches of water.

Harry said suddenly, "I hate hens. *And* chickens."

We all looked at him, then.

He looked back at us. "Well, I do," he said defensively. "I hate them. I hate the way they walk around not really looking at anything. You ever looked into a chicken's eyes?"

"Not for any length of time," said Bill. No one laughed.

"Empty," said Harry, "absolutely empty. No feeling, no sense. They just stalk around." He got up and started to walk around us with that weird, hesitant walk that chickens have. He was making that soft, crooning noise that they make.

"And every so often," Harry said, "they spot something, and they look at it." He jerked his head and looked sideways at the ground. "Like that."

We had to laugh, because even in his chinos and polo shirt, Harry *did* look like a hen, and that sudden darting sideways look was exactly like a hen's.

My laughter was a little forced, though, because that look that Harry did so perfectly reminded me of the way Caroline looked at

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me sometimes. Usually when I'd said something she disapproved of, like one time at lunch with her parents when I had made a remark to her father that she considered out of place. I can't even remember what it was I said; it was inoffensive enough, but enough to make her raise her head from her plate and give me that abrupt, sidelong, and strangely calculating look.

Harry said, "And now there's another one joined the flock." He was looking across the avenue at Bill's house. "Look, they've got Deirdre with them."

We all turned and looked, and sure enough, the four wives had been joined by Deirdre. Deirdre Balsam.

"Well, it didn't take her long to get out of her widow's weeds," said Harry. We could all see that Deirdre was wearing a bright summer dress, and her hair, even at this distance, we could tell, was a bizarre shade of red.

I said, "She looks like one of those candles they sell at that New Age shop in town."

"Still," said Harry, "it's three months. She can't stay in purdah forever."

Deirdre was the widow of George Balsam, who had shuffled off this mortal coil three months before. A freak accident, they had called it in the papers, but then any accident is freak for some papers. George, who was a model-engineering nut, had gone down the garden to his workshop to rewire his lathe, a big three-phase job. He had, quite unlike him, forgotten Rule One: When you're doing anything like that, always take out the fuse and keep it in your pocket, and poor George had taken 440 volts up both arms. Odd that, because George was what you might call your Urban Worrier, a belt-and-braces man. There *was* a fuse in his pocket, according to what I've heard, but it was the wrong one, apparently.

Deirdre had come home from a night out with the girls and had found him down there, dead as a doornail.

"She seems to have got over her grief well enough," said Bill. We were all looking across there. The sun was lower now and shining straight into Bill's picture window. We could quite clearly see Caroline, Suzanne, Melanie, and Tricia sitting in a circle, listening to Deirdre, who was standing, apparently retailing some story. There was a lot of animation, gestures and waving arms, and the wives seemed to be completely enthralled by whatever she was telling them. At any rate, they weren't moving.

And neither were we. We stayed like that, gazing in unison across the avenue to where our wives were listening to Deirdre Balsam tell them something.

"I see she's still on the sauce," said Bill. We could see quite clearly that Deirdre had a large glass of something in her hand.

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"Well, she can afford it," said Doug, "with what she came out with after George went."

A squadron of turtledoves came swooping low across the top of Doug's house making that *flff-flff* sound they do and that weird high squeaking noise. I'm not sure whether that's their wings making that noise or if it's a sort of panting for breath. They wheeled in perfect unison and described a perfect circle around the garden.

Bill squinted up at them.

"I've heard that nobody really knows how they do that," he said. We all followed his gaze and watched the doves execute a perfect break right and swoop off down the avenue.

"Do what?" Harry asked.

"That," said Bill. He held his hands up like a Spitfire pilot describing how he got Jerry over the Channel, and made a wheeling movement. "That formation flying. The leader's leading. But how? Maybe they're watching him for signals. But how do they react so quickly like that? Or maybe the leader's communicating in some way. Nobody's really sure."

"Turtle Leader to Turtle Wing. Break, break, break," said Harry.

Doug stood up suddenly.

"Okay. That's enough fresh air for one day. Why don't we go and play a bit of serious poker. Bring a couple of bottles."

I sighed. I was in for another trouncing. Caroline was always astounded and incredulous whenever I told her I'd been playing poker with Doug. She knows I've got no head for it. She said it was simply peer pressure, fear of being left out of the group. Perhaps she was right.

Doug was already marching towards the house with Bill and Harry trailing him. I turned back to pick up the cognac bottle. In doing that, I was facing straight across the avenue and I saw them. The others were already on the terrace and nearly into the house so I was the only one. But I did. I saw them standing in a line looking across at us. All the pretty young hens. And they saw *me.*

Me

"Me?" I've been saying this morning. "Oh, you know. All right, thanks." And people have been looking at me with that wise look that they put on.

"No," they've been saying, "you're not all right. You will be, in time. But it will take time, Tom, you realise that."

They're trying to be kind. Everyone's very kind. The coroner was kind. A very sympathetic, kind little man was the coroner, who had no difficulty accepting the expert testimony. A track-rod coupling is what it was, apparently, that had held its own until it was

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put under too much stress on that horrible corner by that pub, the Jockey, where it had caused Caroline's little Japanese cabriolet to veer straight into that enormous plane tree that everyone has been saying for years was a danger and too close to the road and should be cut down. And that was that.

She'd been driving too fast, of course, on her way to meet the other wives—well, no, because by then they were all widows—the other members of the Greenacres mob. She'd told me not to wait up for her, and to be sure to lock all the doors and windows because apparently Tricia and Deirdre had told her of some unsavoury-looking characters lurking around the avenue. They'd already told the police, it appears, but she didn't want to come back and find me murdered in my bed. Then she left, driving too fast.

Everyone knew that Caroline drove too fast, particularly on that corner. And everyone knew that I had been on at her for weeks, months even, to take that car in for regular checks. Everybody had heard me go on about it, I made sure of that. But that was poor Caroline for you. And everybody knew that, too. All you had to do was suggest something a little too insistently for her taste and she'd do the exact opposite.

So we had the inquest and we've had a funeral and everyone's been very kind. And two of her sisterhood came. Tricia and Melanie.

Tricia flew in from Monte Carlo, where she had retired on the golden bonuses that Trader Harry had left behind him. And Melanie flew in from Mustique, where she'd retired after selling Bill's software house for an astronomical sum to Microsoft or Sun or one of them, I can't sort them out. I was a little surprised that Suzanne wasn't there. She didn't have far to come: She was still living in Greenacres. For the moment, anyway, until she'd finished ramming through the sales of the sixty-four-house development that Doug had started. But I had heard from Eric Porteous, the local estate agent, that she'd already been looking around a ten-bedroom manor over towards the Weald.

All the widows. The rich young widows.

In the cemetery after the burial service Tricia came up to me, her eyes glittering with grief, and placed a black-gloved hand on my arm. She looked into my eyes.

"Tom," she said, "there are no words."

I nodded.

She said, "This is a pain that only time will heal. But believe me, Tom, we know how you're feeling, Tom. We know."

I nodded again and she left me to join Melanie. A few yards away she looked back, her eyes still glittering.

"We really do, Tom. We *know.*"

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I thought it was pretty unlikely.

At the house afterwards, it was pretty much the same sort of thing. I couldn't wait for it to be over. I couldn't wait to be finished with all that pablum that people dribble out when they don't know what to say after a funeral, when they're drinking your drink and eating your food and they feel in some indefinable way that *they* should be nourishing *you*. You've already given. But they come anyway and they eat and they drink and they put together the meaningless phrases and they say things like, "We're here if you need us, Tom. Anytime."

What does that mean, in fact? I've never understood it. What would the Wadsworths do if I rang them up at three in the morning and said, "I need you. Now. Get yourselves over here, both of you."

They'd put the phone down and go back to sleep is what they'd do. That's what I'd do, if I had been stupid enough to say, "I'm here if you need me." But you go along, don't you. You nod, and smile that sad little smile, perhaps pat the arm of the idiot who is mouthing these robotic formulae.

But at last it was all done. The drift towards the door had started early, and then I had to stand and say goodbye to these people, listen to the same things all over again and say the same things all over again. It went on forever. But at last they were all gone. And I was alone.

I wandered round the house for a while, idly picking up plates and glasses and putting them down again in the same place. The caterers would be coming in to take care of all that tomorrow. It could stay like that. But just for something to do, I wandered into the kitchen with a couple of unfinished plates of crab cakes and other miniature funeral bakemeats with the thought of putting them in the fridge. There's no use in wasting good food, not when there's so much starvation in the world, now is there?

The doorbell rang. I walked through to the hall. Behind the frosted glass door I could see some black shapes. I opened up and there were the absent widows, Suzanne and Deirdre. Suzanne was holding something, a round, foil-covered package.

"Well," I said, "what can I do for you? I'm afraid you're a bit late for the—" I was going to say party, but I stopped myself in time—"for the wake." Is that what it had been? A wake?

Suzanne said, "We couldn't bear the thought of it, Tom. We were sure you'd understand. All those people."

Deirdre said, "We were very close to Caro, Tom. You can appreciate how we felt."

"Well," I said, "come in for a moment, at least."

They came in. I led them through, these two black things, into the living room. I made a helpless gesture.

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"It's still a bit of a mess, I'm afraid. People have only just gone."

"Oh, Tom," said Suzanne, "don't worry. It's always like that. Deirdre and I went through exactly the same thing, didn't we?"

Deirdre nodded.

She said, "Well, at least we can make a start on this."

Suzanne nodded briskly, put down her package on the drinks table, and before I could say or do a thing, they were at it, piling plates, collecting glasses, emptying ashtrays, wiping surfaces, and in two shakes of a lamb's tail, the living room was practically pristine, and they hadn't even raised a sweat. That's women for you.

Then we stood and looked at each other.

I said, "That was really kind of you, but really, it wasn't necessary."

Suzanne said, "Tom, we know how difficult it is to get started again. To do things. To look after yourself. To take care of things; even the smallest things seem difficult. We know."

Deirdre said, "And so we brought you something." She gestured to the foil-wrapped package. "Didn't we, Suze?"

"We did," said Suzanne.

I said, "That's really kind of you, but—"

"It's nothing much," Deirdre said.

"Just a quiche," said Suzanne. "I know you won't feel like it just at the moment, but you will get hungry sooner or later and you can simply pop it in the oven when you feel like it and there you are. No need to worry about opening cans, preparing vegetables."

I said again, "It's really kind of you, but—"

"We'll go," said Suzanne, "and put it in the fridge. Come on."

She picked up the thing and, with me trailing meekly in her wake, she led the way into the kitchen. Over her shoulder she said, rather forcefully, "No point in leaving it. Do it *now.*"

In the kitchen she headed straight for the fridge, stripped off the foil from the quiche, and put it on the top shelf. She did some rather pointless and irritating tidying up of the other things on the shelf.

She was in the middle of this when I heard very distinctly, from the living room, the clink of a bottle against glass. Suzanne heard it, too. She straightened up very suddenly, closed the fridge door, and spun round. Her face was tight with irritation.

"That bloody Deirdre," she said. Then she seemed to make an effort to calm herself. "Tom, I just don't know what we're going to do."

I said, "She's still . . . ?" I lifted my elbow slightly.

She nodded. "Fell off the wagon a week ago for the umpteenth time. I'm taking her down to her AA meeting tonight, for all the good it'll do her. Still, what can you do?"

We went back into the living room. Deirdre was standing a good

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way from the drinks table, but I noticed that the whisky in my bottle of Glenlivet was swaying ever so gently, and Deirdre's eyes were a little too bright for my taste.

Suzanne said, "Well, I think that's all, isn't it? We must be going, Deirdre. Remember, Tom, just pop it in the oven for half an hour."

Deirdre said, "Personally, I think it's best eaten cold."

Suzanne said, "Whatever. But you must eat."

And with that, they left. And for the first time since the police came to tell me of Caroline's horrible end, I was alone. Alone and free to think my own thoughts, without other people putting their thoughts into my head, all the police, doctors, friends, coroners, more friends, undertakers, clergymen, and still more friends, all with their four penn'orth to get in.

I've been lying stretched out on the sofa and thinking about that afternoon at Doug's house and how I had looked across the avenue and seen them looking across at us. Suzanne, Melanie, Caroline, and Tricia, the bright young wives with the dull husbands. And of course Deirdre, who had much to tell them, Deirdre who was giving a seminar, a master-class.

I've been thinking about how it really must have infuriated them that I was just too quick for them, unlike poor Doug, Bill, and Harry. And I've been thinking about that quiche in the fridge. *Pop it in the oven.* In a pig's eye, I will. I wonder what's in it. Something undetectable, knowing them. They're very bright; I have to hand it to them, but not on a bloody plate. What did Deirdre say? *"It's best eaten cold."* I know what's best eaten cold and I wouldn't touch that thing even if I was starving.

The first thing I'm going to do is to throw the bloody thing in the waste disposal.

When I can move, that is. When this dreadful numbing cold stops creeping through my arms and legs and now my chest, which is making it very hard to breathe, and when I can move something and get off the sofa.

There's a strange cottony taste in my mouth and I'm very, very thirsty. If I could move my arm, I could reach for the glass that's still lying where it fell a few minutes ago. Or is it hours? There might still be a drop of whisky in it.

I like a drop of whisky. Everybody knows that. ●

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The Death of Doc Virgo

by Hal Charles

The two Eastern Kentucky University professors who write under the byline Hal Charles often choose rural Kentucky as the setting for their stories. This time out they take us back to a turbulent era, the 1960s, when the citizens of Kentucky reacted very differently from urban America. As usual, they've added a touch of humor to their tale of mayhem.

You know, it's been eight years since high-school graduation, and this is the first time I've been back to Woodhole. Too many painful memories. But one day last week I realized it was finally time to return to the Clement County Public Cemetery to pay my respects. Not a day passes I don't think about the way you died.

1968. The Vietnam War had reached a turning point in public acceptance—except in Clement County, where kids dropped out of Woodhole High to enlist. The mini-dress was in. Not here. The Woodhole Alliance for Cleaner Kids (WACK) got the city council to pass an ordinance requiring girls under twenty-one to have their skirts one inch below their knees. *The Wild Bunch* was showing up in Lexington, but in the land time forgot, the Starz 'n Stripes Theater ran *The Odd Couple* for five straight months. It was either Mark Twain or W. C. Fields who looked prophetic for having proclaimed, "If I heard the world was going to end, I'd move to Kentucky because everything happens there later."

But at Woodhole High in 1968 we couldn't even read Mark Twain. WACK convinced the school board to ban his most famous book. Because Huck didn't live with his father or mother, they labeled the classic as "un-American." In English IV class, we were fed a steady diet of *A Tale of Two Cities, To Have and to Hold,* and *Ivanhoe.* All our meals consisted of Miss Large's getting us to read the classics round-robin. Once when J. D. Bracy, who was both class clown and valedictorian, interrupted her dramatic rendering of Sidney Carton's "far, far better" speech to ask if the uprising of Dickens's French peasants could be equated to the Vietnamese

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expelling the French from their land, Miss Large paused in her crocodile tears, peered over her Ben Franklins with a look that could lop years off a young man's life, and banished J. D. to the principal's office till he could conduct himself "like a proper young gentleman."

Luckily for J. D. and the rest of us, prim and proper Miss Large got knocked up by some local big shot and had to take a "leave of absence." The way we heard it, Hortense, the wife of our county judge-executive, Homer Fanning, had a nephew who was truly desperate for a job. Wily old Hortense withheld her favors till His Honor convinced the school board that Waverly (we never knew if it was his first name or last) was the perfect temporary replacement for Miss Large. Those of us who had been to Judge Fanning's traffic court feared this new appointment was going to come down on our heads harder than His Honor's gavel.

While we waited for Waverly to walk into our senior English class that late September morning, we took to speculating about our substitute teacher. Leah Cokely hoped he was cute 'cause she was tired of turning down dates with "little boys who had more pimples than IQ points." Brad "Bigasa" House, who played left tackle on the football team, guessed Waverly'd be "skinnier than the pole on a butterfly net" 'cause all the real men were in Vietnam—only he said "in country"; Brad wanted to be a jarhead even more than he wanted to be an NFL player. Howie Bowles figured the teacher had to be gay—his exact word was "queer." Everybody knew, he claimed, that was the only type that went to college. But when Waverly entered the class, we were all proved wrong.

Muscular, and taller than most basketball players, he appeared to us in torn jeans, a tie-dyed T-shirt, a pair of sandals on which somebody had printed FLIP and FLOP, hair longer than Miss Large's (who was Pentecostal), and a pair of wire-frame glasses like Nana, my mom's mom, wore.

"You male or female?" says Brad half-seriously.

"Neither, bro. I'm a hermaphrodite."

"See," mutters Howie. "Didn't I tell you he was a little light in his loafers?"

"Hey, bro," says the teacher, who must have had radar ears, "I'm wearing sandals." He perches on one foot like a stork and shoves the leather sole in Howie's face.

"You from this planet?" tries J. D.

"Spaceship Earth," the new teacher says, sitting down cross-legged on Miss Large's always neat desk. "Species, *Homo erectus.*"

"Me, too," says J. D., "especially when Leah bends over to pick up a pencil."

The class all breaks up, except Leah, of course. I expect Waverly to jump all over us just to show his authority, but there he is, probably laughing the loudest. In fourteen years of education I'd never

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heard a teacher laugh before, like it was against their professional code or something.

"What's this 'bro' stuff?" I ask.

"You must have heard some Afro-Americans use that term," answers Waverly. "Listen some—"

"There are no Afro-Americans in Clement County," volunteers Leah.

"Or black people, neither," adds Brad.

The new teacher picks up a textbook from Miss Large's desk. *"Molding Young Minds,"* he reads slowly.

"That's 'mold' as in 'fungus,' " says J. D., who was cleverer than the rest of us combined. "You going to start by having us write one of those 'How I Spent My Summer Vacation' papers, because we already—"

"Right now I'm not interested in your summer vacation," says Waverly.

"No?" says Howie. "How'd you spend your summer?"

Without blinking, the new teacher says, "In the Cook County jail."

The room grows quiet. After a while Brad says, "What'd you do, man? Jaywalk?"

Waverly grins. "A bunch of us staged a sit-in at the Democratic National Convention, and we were carted off by the Windy City pigs."

"I resent that word," says Howie. "My dad's the local sheriff and he works hard."

"Listen carefully. I didn't say *your* father was a pig," returns Waverly, still not raising his voice or crying like Miss Large did when we said something she didn't agree with. "I said the Mace-in-the-face, jackbooted, baton-wielding Gestapo dressed in Chicago police uniforms were pigs."

"Be that as it may," says J. D., using a phrase I know he picked up from *Laugh-In,* "what hieroglyphics you gonna make us read this year?"

"Yeah," charges Howie, "you gonna hand out the same textbooks my mom and dad used to read here?"

Waverly stands and opens his hands as if holding a globe. "What would you like us to read this fall?"

Now we don't know what to say because as long as we had been part of the Clement County School System we had just read what we'd been told.

Leah says, "You'd let us read anything we want?"

"As a class, yes. I'll make you a covenant—"

"A what?" says Howie.

"A deal, a bargain," explains Waverly. "I'll promise to let you all read what you want if you promise to actually read, think, discuss,

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and write about it."

"How can we lose?" I say.

"But what are we going to study?" poses Brad.

"It doesn't matter," says Waverly, "as long as you do the work on your own."

The room grows silent again, which makes me very much aware that for the first time in my educational existence we've been discussing something, not being lectured to. While Waverly stands there as solemnly as if he were Moses waiting for the Lord to present him with the Ten Commandments, a frog suddenly jumps out of Whitley's bib overalls. Now Whitley is a little slower than the rest of us, and this is long before any one of us has ever heard the term "special education" or "mentally challenged." Miss Large and Principal Pike always let Whitley keep Delbert, his pet frog, with him because it kept Whitley happy and out of their hair. But suddenly there is Delbert, hopping across the classroom floor tiles like they're a bunch of lily pads on Plummer's Pond.

Right about the time Waverly bends over and picks up old Delbert, J. D. says, "That's it. We'll study frogs, warts and all."

Without hesitation, our new teacher walks over to the board and with bold left-handed strokes writes two words in chalk: TOAD LIT.

"My Lord," says Howie, burying his head under his arms, "I'm going to spend my final year in high school being taught toad lit by a hippie."

Throughout the fall we kept Waverly's covenant, and although at first you couldn't have gotten any of us to admit it—in public, at least—English IV meant more to all of us, except maybe Brad, than Friday-night football games. Waverly stuck to his part of the bargain in trying to make us stand on our own. He found all sorts of "fab" things to study about frogs. Sometimes with unexpected consequences.

One day Waverly had us read out loud a poem called "The Death of a Toad." This poet named Wilbur (not the same guy who could talk to Mr. Ed) ran over a frog with his lawn mower, but, as he watched it, he couldn't tell whether it was alive or dead. Leah must have really been affected. In her next class, Biology Lab, she refused to dissect a frog because, like Wilbur, she couldn't be sure whether it was living or deceased. Of course Whitley, who was always afraid something would happen to Delbert, sided with Leah. Principal Pike, on the other hand, sided with Mr. Feathers, the lab teacher, and both my friends got Saturday detention.

When Waverly heard about this development in class the next day, he was upset. He went on for almost the entire period about "correspondences," which at first I thought was a big word for letters, but our new leader explained it was really "the one life

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shared by human nature and Mother Nature." Even when we didn't know what Waverly was talking about, we had to admit that coming from his mouth it sure sounded good. What could we do about Principal Pike's punishment of our friends? Waverly told us to meet him a half-hour before school started at the main entrance.

Well, as the sun was rising—"rosy-fingered," Waverly called it—he had us sit down in a line in front of the doorway. We interlocked our arms as if we were doing a sit-down version of a square-dance reel. Since it was kind of boring just squatting there, Waverly began to play a tune on his guitar and taught us the words. When Principal Pike and the rest of our teachers arrived, they couldn't get through a human chain singing "We Shall Overcome." I have to admit it was fun watching Howie's father try to lift us as we went limp. We all got off with a stern warning and an hour's lecture, but Howie's rear end was too sore to stage another sit-in for at least a week.

What doesn't break you, Waverly taught us, makes you stronger. We began to hang out together more. At lunch we refused the hospital food of the cafeteria and sat outside under the big walnut tree with our teacher. Now most of us had grown up eating meat and potatoes, catfish and slaw, but not him. We were willing to try his nuts and raisins, but stopped short of that foul-smelling bean dip.

On Saturday, Waverly decided we needed a show of "solidarity" with "our brothers and sisters in detention," so he parked his Volkswagen van outside their classroom, took out some supplies he had bought at Whitley's father's hardware store, and invited us to help him with a new paint job. Well, Principal Pike couldn't stand us having fun together—or maybe it was the loud music. Waverly's radio picked up the Lexington stations, and while we painted, green mostly, we listened to music whose real meaning he explained. In The Association's song "Along Comes Mary," he pointed out that Mary was a sort of code word for marijuana. When the Byrds got through singing, he asked us what we thought a tambourine man was. Most of us were certain it was a musician, but he said that the song's original writer, Bob Dylan, used it as a "metaphor" for a coke dealer.

Of course that's the moment Sheriff Bowles shows up in his spanking-new police car like they drive on *Adam-12*. He hears what Waverly says, spits out a wad of tobacco, and says he doesn't think the song is some commercial for Coca-Cola. Waverly says no—that "coke" is slang for something people snort. Then, I swear to God, the sheriff looks at him strangely, scoffs, and challenges him: "Well, smartie, how do they keep the Coke bottle from getting stuck in their noses?"

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Now we've all lived in Clement County our entire lives, but we know a little about drugs. After all, during the 1940s they used to raise hemp down on the Kentucky River for the war effort, and there are a lot of those plants down there that can still produce some high-quality highs. We can't contain ourselves and break out laughing.

Undeterred, the sheriff begins circling Waverly's van, on which we've painted a lot of green hoppers. "Boy," he says to Waverly, "what do you call this thing?"

"That," says J. D. proudly while I'm humming the *Batman* theme song, "is the Toadmobile."

"It'll be towed, all right," says the sheriff, grabbing the squad car's microphone, "soon as I can get Barger's Wrecker Service over here." Then Sheriff Bowles does the harshest thing to us he could.

He calls for a meeting of WACK.

The Woodhole High School auditorium looked like it had been decorated for a VFW meeting or at least a political convention. All the flags and red-white-and-blue bunting made it look like the Fourth of July, though it was closer to Halloween. With Mr. Marcum leading the marching band in a medley of patriotic hymns, our parents herded us kids into the auditorium as if we were no more than stray cows. I never understood the connection between this "Mom, the flag, and apple pie" stuff and clean kids, but then again, until that year, school had never trained me to think at all. I was far from the class bottom-dictorian, but years of mental inactivity had me more worried about taking the ACTs in a few weeks than that night's WACK shebang.

Judge Fanning opened the meeting with the Pledge of Allegiance. Then Brother Powell had us all read the Ten Commandments out loud from the wall because, "Sure as I'm a-standing here humbly before ya, one day the United States Supreme Court is gonna tell us we can't post them no more." It sure sounded strange that Brother Powell would criticize our country in the middle of Patriotism Central, but I was just a kid—what did I know?

Various parents approached the microphone at center stage as if it was an upright snake at first, then, feeding on each other's energy, proceeded to criticize the strange behavior the class of '69 was displaying—singing strange songs, holding protest meetings, eating that "California food," even "God-fearing, frog-gigging kids disobeying direct orders to dissect them critters in biology class." I dozed through the program just as I did while Mom and Dad watched Walter Cronkite read the evening news. That's the way it was, with nobody sure if the meeting was over, when Leah's daddy, who owned the local radio station (WMLP, where there's "More Listening Pleasure"), took the microphone to disagree with the others.

"I was reading over my daughter's homework assignment the

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other night, a story by Kentucky's own Jesse Stuart called 'Frog-Trouncin' Contest.' Anyway, they put this frog on a seesaw and smack the other end with a mallet to see who can lift that frog closest to heaven. . . ."

"Sounds like a great idea," says Mel Large, who is Miss Large's brother and head of the Chamber of Commerce. "We could make it part of our annual Fourth of July celebration."

"Heck," says Sheriff Bowles, who pitches for our traveling softball team, the Woodhole Whackers, "we could form a frog-trouncing team to take on them yahoos in surrounding counties."

Amidst all the applause, Waverly strolls onstage and, in disgust, grabs the microphone vacated by Leah's daddy. As he waves his hands for the crowd to quiet, most of the townspeople stand up—not out of respect, mind you, but to get a good look at him. Hippies are as rare as black people in Clement County. "You're missing the point of Mr. Stuart's story," our teacher starts as though the auditorium is nothing more than a big classroom. "As Amos Johnson says therein, frog-trouncing is mean, even crueler than cockfighting."

Howie's dad stands up. "You got something to say to me about my cock, you say it to my face."

Waverly throws up his hands in front of his face in mock self-defense. "Hey, I'm a lover, not a fighter."

Well, the student body starts to howl with laughter. Waverly grabs his guitar and shouts into the microphone, "You all know what a hootenanny is?"

"Yahoo!" screams Whitley as loud as if Delbert has just given birth.

Led by Waverly's six-string and the senior class, we end the WACK meeting, amidst the overruled protests of Sheriff Bowles and a few members, on a musical note, with everyone singing Woody Guthrie's "This Land Is Your Land."

There was more changing in Clement County that fall than the color of its leaves or the minds of its students. Fact is, things got downright serious. One day Waverly made it to class late because someone ran him off the road. Somebody else spray-painted on the window of the Toadmobile HIPPIE GO HOME while he was parked at Judge Fanning's. Hortense Fanning was already in a tizzy because her best friend, Miss Large, had just up and moved to Florida.

Then, on top of everything else, I got in trouble—or nearly did. It was the Saturday we took the ACT, the test that determined whether we went on to college and where. Mom and Dad had put pressure on me since I learned how to read that I was going to be the first Lowe to go to college, but I'd always taken better to sports than to books. Luckily, my room proctor turned out to be Waverly, and I sat down behind J. D. because we were friends and such. By

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the end of the session I was so tired I needed one of what Howie always called "a left-handed cigarette." As I started out into the afternoon sun, Waverly called me into his room and locked the door behind him.

"Carson"—everyone else called me Kit, after the pioneer who was born in an adjacent county—"when most students 'round here need help, they look up for guidance. Now, unless you worship J. D. Bracy as your chief deity, you were cheating back there."

I don't bother to deny it. No sense to it. Not when you're caught red-handed and red-faced. I'm wondering how to look my disappointed parents in the eyes when Waverly does something I don't expect.

"Carson, I wrote on your test: 'STUDENT GOT SICK AND NEVER FINISHED.' Now you've got another chance to take the ACT in six weeks. That'll mean a lot of extra studying, but we're going to get through it, bro."

I look at him with tears hiding behind my eyelids. "Why . . . why are you doing this for me? No one . . ."

Waverly pulls his scraggly blond hair back into a ponytail. "When I got in real big trouble recently, I realized we all make mistakes and that everybody needs a second chance."

And every Saturday I came back to school for some tutoring. Maybe it was because I spent the extra time with Waverly that I felt I got to know him pretty well. He was usually so upbeat he was infectious. I mean, Sheriff Bowles was all over him like flies on a bull. Waverly would get pulled over for coming to a rolling stop, speeding, or failing to signal a turn, but Judge Fanning would never fine him more than a buck an offense (which taught me to never underestimate the power of a woman). And through it all Waverly'd be grinning, a living smiley-face like those Miss Large used to stick on our papers.

But then along about the end of October the sheriff stopped harassing him, and we expected Waverly to be even happier. Instead, he seemed miserable. Adults just don't make sense. Some days he looked too tired even to show us how to make those paper airplanes that soared over school property out onto Route 52. We'd catch him going over to the door and looking around or staring out the classroom windows as if something was out there we couldn't see.

All that changed for a while when we got to the next story in Toad Lit. The day seemed different from the moment Principal Pike interrupted class with a package that was marked SPECIAL DELIVERY. Well, Waverly just leaves this thing the size of one of my mother's hat boxes sitting on the corner of his desk, and he seems to pay no attention to it. Now we're all like kids at a birthday party who have just got to open a present the moment we spot

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it, but Waverly sits there in the lotus position on Miss Large's once-sacred desk recounting Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper,* going on about how Prince Edward changes clothes with his exact twin, a pauper boy, and lives his life in disguise. Now I was just wondering if Waverly had chosen to say something about this Twain book because WACK had gotten *Huck Finn* banned when I saw the box move. Leah jumped. So did Delbert. That sucker leapt right from Whitley's hands and hopped toward the desk. A couple of kids shook their heads, settled back, and I swear the box moved again. Now I'd never been to one of those séances, but at that moment you could have easily convinced me that spirits were loose in that classroom.

Finally Brad gets up and heads for the box. "If you're not going to open it," he says, "I am."

Leah just looks all goo-goo-eyed, and everybody knows her puppy-love crush on Waverly is starting to reach full, adult doghood.

"Is that the largest Mexican jumping bean in captivity?" asks J. D.

" 'It might be a parrot, or it might be a canary, maybe, but it ain't,' " says Waverly. " 'It's only just a—' "

"Frog," I finish, remembering our homework assignment was to read that short story by Twain.

"Fab, Carson," says Waverly. And he begins to unwrap the box. "Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls of all ages, I present for your entertainment . . . Notorious." And from the box he pulls this huge green and squatty thing the size of a house cat with big eyes. "*Bufo alvarius,* commonly known as the notorious jumping frog of Calaveras County."

"Now," says Whitley, picking up Delbert, "Waverly and me, we each gots one of our own."

Waverly explains how he got a friend of his in California to send him the frog. Now Notorious wasn't a champion or nothing, our teacher stresses, but he was still competitive.

"How far you think he can leap without any buckshot in him?" says J. D., who must have read the story, too.

"Let's find out," Waverly answers, and draws a line in chalk at the front of the room. Then he has Whitley set Delbert down. Now frogs are like your kid sister or brother—they never perform when you want them to, but finally Whitley sweet-talks his little buddy into leaping.

I put my pencil down at the spot, and we measure the long jump. "Six feet, seven and one-half inches."

Howie wants to start a betting pool like we do on the Kentucky Derby, but Waverly says authoritatively, "There are some things we do in life for reasons other than money." Then he sets Notorious

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down. The frog sits there like a jade doorstop, looks to the back of the classroom, and vaults as if it sees a swarm of flies there.

Everyone is more astounded than if Principal Pike actually smiled. I measure it off. "Nineteen feet, two inches," I announce.

"Holy kangaroo, Batman," says J. D.

Word got around quick about that feat, and it wasn't long before the city fathers heard about Notorious. Now, Halloween celebrations have been banned in Clement County since before Brother Powell. I mean, I'd never once gone trick-or-treating because years ago the preachers were convinced Halloween was a pagan holiday and we weren't going to be "parishioners of the pitchfork." So for the Saturday Fall Festival, which is even bigger than Court Day in Mount Sterling or the Mushroom Festival in Estill County, the city council proclaimed the highlight would be . . . ta-da: the Jumpfrog Jubilee.

Up to that Saturday, farmers had been turning over everything including pond scum to uncover the biggest bullfrogs that had gone ungigged. The finals were like the Cincinnati Reds playing the Woodhole Whackers—Notorious beat the local favorite by nine feet. Waverly had his picture taken, and all seemed right with the world.

Everybody sat around eating pumpkin pie and drinking cider, a lot of it hard once our parents started to leave. Brad, J. D., Howie, Whitley, and I built a bonfire to keep back the cold that had started to accompany the October nights.

Whitley picks up a thick woolly worm and says, "Sure sign we gonna have lots of snow this winter."

"Speaking of signs," chirps in Leah, "what's yours, Waverly? With your love of nuts and berries and toads, it'd have to be an earth sign."

J. D., who's smart outside of school, too, knows what's going on, so he moves between our teacher and his girl to ensure that any sparks flying that night are going to come from the fire. Brad, who knows he has to be passing Waverly's class to be eligible for the football playoffs, pretends to be more interested than he is. Howie's not sure how to act because he knows there's something going on between his father and Waverly and has confided in me that ever since our teacher caught him selling imported marijuana he's afraid Waverly's going to tell his father.

"Perceptive as ever, Leah," says Waverly. "I'm a Virgo."

"The sixth sign," says Leah, who has developed a sudden passion for astrology or whatever topic is on Waverly's lips at the moment.

"Usually," adds the teacher, "represented by a virgin—"

"That's sure not Leah, then," says J. D., and she punches him on the arm, hard.

"Holding the grain of the harvest," continues Waverly, sliding over the controversy. "It's usually thought to be a fertility symbol."

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"The way you fertilize young minds," I add.

"Where I come from," says Brad, "fertilizer is usually what horses leave in the bottom of their stalls."

"How come you're so smart, Waverly?" says Howie. "You seem to know everything."

"Years of schooling. I got my Ph.D. at Berkeley."

"Is that PHD as in 'Piled Higher and Deeper'?" says J. D.

Ignoring him, Leah says, "I never liked the name Waverly. I think we should call you Doctor Virgo."

"Doc Virgo," I say.

And before I know it, all of us are chanting "Doc Virgo, Doc Virgo" like we're at some kind of pep rally.

Slowly the fire burns down, and everybody drifts away in a preview of our post-graduation life. Till it's just me and Doc Virgo, and Notorious, of course. Doc starts to say something, then pulls out his guitar. The first song I recognize as Bob Dylan's "The Times They Are A-Changing." I have the feeling Doc is trying, even more roundabout than his questions in class, to communicate with me on another level.

"Here's a song I'm trying to write," he announces. "It comes from 'The Rubáiyát of Omar Khayyám.' " His strings sound like a November wind bidding farewell to the fall. "The bird is on the wing," he sings in a voice not as gravelly as Dylan's.

Just when I think I've got him translated, he stops and does the unexpected. He rolls up something crystalline in paper, lights it, and tokes. Then he hands the joint to me.

"What is it?" I say, trying to act as if smoking dope is something I do every day with no more thought than cleaning the supper table.

"Bufotenine. Dried venom from Notorious's back. It's an hallucinogen."

I inhale and hold. The world spins and turns colors like when I'm on the Tilt-A-Whirl at the Clement County Fair. I can hear Doc breathe, or maybe it's me. I think I return the joint to him. "You're leaving, aren't you?" I say.

"Damn, Carson," he says in an echo chamber, "you're getting perceptive."

I fight to stand up. "You can't go."

"Easy, bro. Remember me telling you about second chances. That came from the heart, mine." He taps his chest and sweeps his fingers across the six-string. "That group I went to Chicago with last summer, the one I told you about, was from the university in Wisconsin where I was teaching. SAVE, Students Against a Violent Environment. Soon as we got out of jail they wanted to make a statement. Well, I met them one night and it turned out they wanted to blow up the ROTC building on campus."

"I thought they were against violence."

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"One of the contradictions common to youthful idealism. So as I let them off on campus with their explosives, I was scared to death of what I'd gotten myself into. I was supposed to wait for them, but I took off and drove to this fishing cabin in Minnesota an old girlfriend's family owns."

"You just left them," I think I say, trying to put the simplest of stories together.

"What else could I do? I hid out for a while, then, as a last resort, I called Aunt Hortense, and *voilà.*"

Two and two didn't add up to four, but I was in the ballpark. "Those times you were looking out doors and windows you were looking for your friends?"

"Or the feds or a bounty hunter. SAVE claimed credit for the bombing, and the authorities had files on all members of the group—including me. So now I've got to go. Once a picture of me and Notorious shows up in some newspaper, I'm history. Hell, I don't even know who ran me and the Toadmobile off the road. Might have been my old friends in SAVE."

"That's a far-out chance," I counter.

"Listen, I had a friend in the college who was hired by Hoover's Heroes to do nothing but subscribe to out-of-town papers and clip anything out of the ordinary. Believe me, I know how the Establishment works." He takes a long hit. "But I guess it doesn't make much difference who finds me first, SAVE or the Man."

"I was learning so much," I protest. "Without your help, Doc, I can't get high enough ACTs."

"How many times have I told you that you've got to learn to do things on your own?"

I'm mad now, and the single toke is starting to wear off. I pick up Waverly by his tie-dyed T-shirt. "I won't let you leave. I won't." Then I'm shaking him and crying. When I finish wiping my eyes dry, he's gone.

Monday morning everybody sensed something was wrong as we sat in our first-period English class waiting for the newly christened Doc Virgo, who was never late. All of us took it as a bad sign when Whitley broke the anxious silence with the news that upon graduation the city had offered him the job of being custodian at the Clement County Public Cemetery.

Then Principal Pike walks in looking even graver than when he announced to us Miss Large was going on leave. "I . . . I don't know how to tell you this," he stammers, "but very early this morning Sheriff Bowles was called to Bend Road . . . you know, where the Palisades start to overlook the Kentucky River. Down below, he found what was left of the vehicle. . . . I believe you call it the Toadmobile or such."

At that moment Leah faints, her falling head striking the

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wooden desktop with a thud.

"I'm sorry," Principal Pike adds as though as an afterthought.

School was called off Wednesday morning for the funeral that Hortense and the judge hastily put together. There was no visitation or anything at the Dezarn Funeral Home as Sheriff Bowles claimed the body was so mangled that even a closed casket would have been grotesque. Most of the town showed up, including those hypocritical members of WACK, who I was sure were silently thanking the powers that be that Doc Virgo was gone. Some of the class openly wept, some stood in disbelief, and others, I was sure, were relieved our hippie teacher no longer walked among us.

Yeah, Doc, it was a sad time for most of the senior class. In fact, that day was a lot like today—cold, overcast, and a little drizzle seeping through the heavy air. I see Whitley's done a fine job keeping your marker looking nice. How do you like this marble frog on top here? Gift of the class of '69. Looks like it's poised for tomorrow's ninth annual Jumpfrog Jubilee, not that any toad will ever break Notorious's record.

Whitley ever tell you about all the speculation on your death? Some said you couldn't make that S-curve on Bend Road in the early morning fog. Some thought the slick roads that day might have been a contributing factor, but others just knew you were high on drugs. Some kids in the class swore it could have been Brother Powell or one of those WACK fanatics showing their love of God by killing off a sinner. Brad always suspected J. D. had something to do with it, what with him being so jealous of Leah's mooning after you. Did you know those two got married, moved to Ohio? After she finally got over you, of course. Our next substitute teacher kept Brad eligible right through baseball. He went to EKU on a football scholarship—graduated a couple of years ago, then joined the Marines. 'Course there was always that rumor you'd gotten in with a bad crowd before you came and they had something to do with it. Everybody knew Sheriff Bowles had it in for you—though they didn't know what you knew about him—and he did find the wreck. Funny, after being the focus of that Lexington TV station's "If it bleeds, it leads" story, he suddenly up and left. Went South, far South. Dade County, I hear.

Yeah, there were a lot of rumors, but we know the real truth, don't we, Doc?

I didn't want to do it, and as long as you were sober, you pled with me, but I had to. We both knew it was the only way things could end. I know you told me it could ruin my life if people found out, but they never did, and besides, I'd made up my mind. I had to even the score with you.

That Sunday night I drove the Toadmobile out on Bend Road

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you were so scared and high on toad juice you couldn't do a thing to stop me. After the way we'd decorated it, though, I hated to roll that beautiful vehicle over the Palisades. What a waste! I have to admit I was surprised it didn't burst into flames like all those cars do in the movies.

I thought it was a simple, clever plan. After you passed along what your Aunt Hortense had told you about her friend Miss Large dallying with the sheriff, it was easy for me to convince Bowles to take care of things properly. Closed casket, quick funeral, no investigation.

Remember how I told you I'd never be able to pass the ACTs without you, that you'd let me down? Well, Doc, I was wrong. Maybe it was easier because you were gone, but you were right—I had to do it on my own. Yeah, I'm still going to college at nights working on my Ph.D. Piling it higher and deeper, like old J.D. used to say. Don't want to teach high school all my life.

Yeah, Doc Virgo died that night. Big picture and story in the Lexington paper for everybody to see. For somebody to clip and file. But Waverly, he started to sober up about the time we reached the I-75 rest stop in my car. Haircut and a shave in the men's room, a Tilghman College sweatshirt to replace the tie-dyed tee. And you thought nobody was listening the time you told us about Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper.* Not a day goes by, especially when I hear a frog croak, that I don't see my all-time favorite teacher climbing into that eighteen-wheeler hitching south.

And each time that image comes to mind, I hope Waverly made as much of his second chance as I have of mine. Oh, one last thing you might want to know. This last spring I taught my high-school English class a new unit—called it Toad Lit. ●

White Collar Crime

by Stephen D. Rogers

Don't call it a murder
Crime of passion instead
His collar was white
But the lipstick was red

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A TALK WITH GAVIN POLONE

(continued from page 129)

EQMM: When a story is being told on film, what do you feel is most important: intellectually challenging the audience, surprising them, scaring them, or something else?

POLONE: You know, I think you have to have people connect with the characters first. A lot of the other stuff follows logical patterns—in terms of scaring them. But if you don't care about the character at all, then you don't care about what's going to happen to them, so the events, the mystery, the surprise doesn't resonate with the viewer. So I would say it's most important to create characters that you really like. Obviously having one of the greatest American actors currently working playing the role helps also.

EQMM: Your filmography includes everything from romantic comedy to horror, on both TV and the big screen. But a large proportion of your films involve crime and suspense plots. Are you particularly attracted to those sorts of stories?

POLONE: I'm attracted to good material, and also things that are easily accessible. So I would say yes, but I like a lot of different kinds of things; I like good versions of whatever it is that I'm doing. Specifically, if you're talking about suspense, crime, and thrillers, I probably do have a particular attraction to those stories. But I'd like to say that, intellectually, I'm attracted to a lot of different kinds of genres.

EQMM: You're attracted to a good story.

POLONE: That's right. And good execution.

EQMM: What are some other projects that are in the works?

POLONE: *Tick-Tock* is in development. *P.I.* was running on FX, and right now we're negotiating with another cable network to pick it up after that. It ran on FX this year. It's more of a reality show, where we followed private investigators on cases. We actually have a little bit of association with *P.I.* magazine.

EQMM: Ah. There is also a film called *Suspense.*

POLONE: *Suspense* was a pilot that Dave Koepp and I did, but it didn't go forward.

EQMM: It's a great title. Back in the golden age of radio, there was a popular anthology program by that title.

POLONE: Oh, really? It was a really good pilot. It was an anthology program also, which is a difficult thing to get any broadcast network to do. They feel very negative about those things.

EQMM: What else can you tell us about working on *Secret Window?*

POLONE: It was such a dream come true to do the project with a great cast like that. And any time I get a chance to work with Dave, I wouldn't even call it work. He's one of my closest friends, and one of the most talented people I've ever met. I feel really lucky that I had the opportunity. ●

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Art by June Levine

Don't Tell Mom

by Pam Barnsley

Her mom would kill her if she knew Eleanor had taken her good black dress without asking. Not that asking helped. The answer to everything was no.

Eleanor leaned closer towards the motel bathroom mirror and rubbed one cheekbone with Frosted Passion. The little sparkles really did enhance the undertones in her brown eyes—at least Eleanor was pretty sure they did, she just wasn't sure what undertones were. She smoothed the cream blush on her other cheekbone and leaned back, turning her head critically, as far to each side as she could and still see her reflection. She puckered her lips—Rose Diamonds—and blew a sultry kiss at the mirror. Look out, Lenny.

Quickly Eleanor rolled her kilt and blouse together and stuffed them in her knapsack alongside her homework. Her mother's black dress didn't hang the same on Eleanor's gangly frame, but at least it was black, and everyone knew black was so It.

"You don't know as much as you think you do, missy," her mom would say. Hah, Eleanor knew plenty. And she didn't like being called missy.

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Her mom was always treating her like a little kid, the same as a lot of uptight grownups did. Lenny didn't. He treated Eleanor like an adult and shared his cigarettes with her.

She had met Lenny at the bus stop twenty-seven days ago. He was so cool. He was tall and slim, with a black leather jacket that was scuffed just the right amount. And the amazing thing was that he had been interested in Eleanor right off. They had so much in common and they talked for ages, or at least as long as Eleanor could risk hanging around. She didn't like to admit to Lenny that she had to be home from school before her mom got off work. Twenty-seven days and now here they were, my God, at the Traveler's Inn Motel.

For the past few years Canadian Pam Barnsley has worked as a snowboard instructor in the resort of Whistler, British Columbia. She is the author of numerous newspaper and magazine articles and two scripts for the CBC television series *The Beachcombers*. In November of 2002 her first short story, "Next Time Will Be Different," was published in *EQMM*'s Department of First Stories. †

"Don't you go getting in over your head," her mom would say. "If I find out you've been misbehaving . . ."

Well, her mom wouldn't find out. She didn't give Eleanor credit for the brains her daughter had, that was her mother's problem.

Lenny was at the little kitchenette table when Eleanor came out of the bathroom. His head was bent over his diagrams and he was squinting, as if he needed glasses. Maybe he hid them, the way Eleanor hid her retainer when she didn't want to be seen looking like some little dork.

The diagrams were the ones he had made of the jewelry store where Eleanor's mom worked. Mrs. Korda was top salesperson at Zamphir's Fine Jewelry.

Eleanor leaned her hip against the table the way she'd seen the sexy Italian detective do on the television show *NYPD Blue*. Her mom did not approve of television.

"Television rots the brain, Eleanor Louise. Pay attention to your books and you'll go a lot further in this world." Hah, look who was going further now. And Eleanor didn't like being called Eleanor Louise. As a name, it sucked.

"So," Eleanor said, and waited for Lenny to notice the new Eleanor in the black dress.

"Hmm," Lenny said, but he didn't even look up. He was still intent on his diagrams. The keys Eleanor had taken from her mother's purse that morning were on the table, along with a pack

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of cigarettes, the half-full ashtray, Lenny's two pairs of surgical gloves, and a little headlamp from the outdoors shop.

"Should I make a reservation for us?" Eleanor asked. She reached across Lenny and pulled a cigarette from the pack.

"What for?"

"The fancy restaurant. You know." Eleanor lit the cigarette and narrowed her eyes as she inhaled. Both the criminals and the detectives did that on *Homicide: Life on the Street* when they smoked.

"Huh?" Lenny looked up now but he didn't seem to notice the change in Eleanor. "What restaurant?"

"You said we'd celebrate. After . . . you know."

"Oh, right. Sure. But not a restaurant, that's too risky. I'll bring some pizza on my way back. We'll celebrate here." In the harsh overhead light Eleanor noticed for the first time the angry red pimples in the faint stubble on Lenny's chin.

Eleanor was disappointed. She had practiced raising one finger to call the waiter, had practiced laughing at the wonderful conversation in the candlelight, practiced leaving the last bite of her cheesecake on the plate as if she ate it all the time.

"You're sure this is the right code?" Lenny said.

"Of course. It's Mr. Zamphir's birth date." Eleanor rolled her eyes. How stupid could Mr. Zamphir be? Everyone knew you shouldn't use your birth date as a security code. Didn't he watch TV? Even the old Fletcher biddy on *Murder, She Wrote* could crack a code by figuring out birth dates.

Eleanor sat down in the other chrome and vinyl chair, crossed her legs, and let the hem of her mother's dress ride up. She picked up the keys to Zamphir's and twirled them around her finger. She couldn't smoke while she was doing this because it was too much like patting your head while you rubbed your tummy—you were bound to screw up. Today was only Saturday, and she would slip the keys back into her mother's purse on Sunday. No one would ever know.

"Why do you need such a large duffel?" Eleanor asked.

Lenny looked at her and laughed. "I might want a big necklace," he said. He reached across and took the cigarette from Eleanor's hand. He tapped the long ash into the ashtray and set the cigarette in the corner of his mouth; he didn't need his hands to smoke.

"But you said just a few things. One or two so no one would ever notice."

"Well, now that I've gone to all this trouble . . ." Lenny folded the diagrams and stuffed them in his back pocket.

But the trouble had all been hers, not Lenny's. "I'm the one risking getting caught by my mom," Eleanor said.

"Listen, Eleanor Louise, I'll be back in an hour and you can put the keys back in your mother's purse. Okay?" Lenny shrugged into his leather jacket and shoved the surgical gloves and headlamp

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into a side pocket of the duffel.

Eleanor hated being called Eleanor Louise and Lenny knew it. "It's not okay. If you take too much, they'll notice. My mom might get suspicious."

"Suspicious! You keep your little mouth shut or I'll tell your goddamn mother exactly what you've been up to." Lenny slung the duffel bag over his shoulder.

Eleanor sucked in such a big breath of air she thought she might pass out. "No! You can't!"

But Lenny only snatched the keys off her finger and went out into the night.

It felt like hours. Eleanor tried not to bite her fingernails while she waited but it was too much to ask.

"Only babies chew their fingernails," her mom would say. Fine for her, she didn't have the stress of going to school and having a hot boyfriend. A boyfriend who threatened to tell her mother.

He couldn't, he just couldn't. Eleanor spat out the last hangnail and jumped up. In the tiny kitchenette she found plates, forks, and glasses. She set these on the table, along with a couple of folded paper towels to use as dinner napkins. She just hoped it would be Hawaiian or pepperoni, not something gross with artichokes or anchovies. She brought over the scarred wooden cutting board and the large chef's knife and set these in the middle of the little table. There.

When Lenny knocked on the door Eleanor made herself walk slowly to it—no point in him thinking she was just sitting here waiting, holding her breath. Lenny pounded and she skipped the last step to open the door.

The first thing she noticed was the alcohol on his breath when he said, "Yeah, baby!" The second was the duffel; it looked full. He slung it inside where it landed on the cracked linoleum with a solid *thwump*.

"I'll get the pizza," he said, and turned back to the rental car, which was parked a few feet in front of their motel-room door. Eleanor held the door wide. She could hear the river a hundred yards behind the motel and the sound of a car fading down the highway. Lenny returned with the pizza and a bottle of whiskey and shut the door against the night.

"Yeah," Lenny said again, and he sat at the table. His grin was so wide Eleanor could've fit a dinner plate between his crooked teeth. Lenny shoved the place setting roughly aside and replaced it with the duffel. "Yeah."

When he opened the bag, Eleanor's hands flew to her mouth. "Oh my God, oh my God."

The duffel was full of necklaces and rings and bracelets and

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watches and more. It sparkled and glittered and twinkled like a bag of birthday sparklers, as flashy as fireworks, as hot as hell. It was horrible.

It was Zamphir's whole friggin' stock.

"They'll know the store's been robbed," Eleanor almost wailed.

Lenny sieved his hands through the jewels. "No kidding."

"You said just a few. So they wouldn't even notice. Or if they did, they'd just think it was a shoplifter. Now what?"

"Now what?" was another of her mom's famous phrases, and it was usually hard to answer. Usually Eleanor just scowled if she dared; let her mother imagine all the answers Eleanor was keeping to herself.

Lenny was unfazed. "Now we celebrate." Reluctantly he set the duffel down on the floor, close beside his feet. Taking the whiskey bottle, he filled the two drinking glasses Eleanor had set on the table. He picked up his, clinked it against Eleanor's, and took a long swallow.

"Yeah," he said again.

Eleanor didn't touch hers. She hated the taste of whiskey and Lenny hadn't even thought to buy mixer. She still stood beside the dinette; her bitten nails curling into her palms weren't even long enough to hurt when she squeezed.

"Sit down. You're acting like a kid." Lenny flipped open the pizza box and pulled out the biggest piece. The strings of melted cheese stretched long, all the way to his plate, but he took a bite without seeming to notice.

Eleanor took the chef's knife and cut through the strands. Then she cut cleanly through the rest of the pieces, grimacing at the chunks of greasy hamburger meat mixed with something that looked like olives. No doubt there were anchovies hidden in it, too.

"My mom—"

"Your mom's not going to say a word." Pizza sauce escaped from Lenny's mouth and left a greasy orange stripe down to his chin. Eleanor held out a paper towel but he ignored it. "She's in as much trouble as we are if she does."

"What?"

"I'm looking forward to seeing your old lady's face when I tell her. She won't be so snotty with me then." Lenny stuffed another corner of the pizza into his mouth and chewed.

"You can't talk to her. You can't."

"Oh yes I can, and I will."

Eleanor's head was shaking back and forth like a metronome.

Lenny finished the whiskey and wiped his mouth with his sleeve. "You think she's going to tell them her daughter stole the keys, and that she let you know the security code? No way. She'll keep her mouth shut, don't you worry, missy. Here, have a piece

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before it's all gone."

Being called missy was another thing Eleanor hated. Worse than anchovies. But she couldn't deal with that right now. Right now she was totally freaked out. Lenny would tell her mom. He couldn't, he just couldn't, but he would. She couldn't let him.

Eleanor was afraid the knife would glance off one of his ribs like in the horror show she saw last week where the psycho stabbed the prom queen in the back and she fell down dead, but it turned out the knife had only glanced off a rib. So she struck with all the force she had. And no hesitation marks, either; she knew about those from *Law and Order.*

Lenny barely made a noise. But honestly, what a mess.

"You've gone and done it now," her mother would say.

Eleanor finally sat down. Her mother's dress was wet with Lenny's blood, the whiskey tasted like antiseptic when she drank it, and the last slice of pizza was stone cold. Lenny lay sprawled on the floor.

Think, think, think, you silly ditz.

But how could she get out of this mess now? Eleanor took another small sip and wrinkled up her nose. Having no mixer really sucked.

Lenny looked like some cop should come and draw a chalk outline around his body. Then the detectives would find the jewelry, the knife, and her fingerprints. Then her mom would find out. No!

If there was one thing her mother had taught Eleanor, it was how to clean.

She took one more sip and poured the rest of the whiskey down the toilet. Under the kitchenette sink she found a pair of rubber gloves and cleaning supplies. The pizza, cigarettes, and whiskey bottle went into the garbage bag she would take away with her.

Up to her elbows in hot sudsy water, Eleanor scrubbed the dishes and the chef's knife. She was no fool. Anyone who'd seen half as many episodes of *Cold Squad* as Eleanor had knew you couldn't get rid of all traces of blood from a weapon. She'd take that with her, too, and get rid of it somewhere else. Lenny had registered at the motel under a false name and paid cash. At least he knew how they could trace your whole life through credit-card receipts.

She was lucky she hadn't shot Lenny. Apart from the noise, gunpowder residue would be detectable on her hands for at least another day.

"The harder you work, the luckier you get," her mother would say, and that was as close to humorous as her mother ever got.

Eleanor scrubbed the table, and anywhere on the walls and cupboards and door she might have touched. She scrubbed the tired bathroom and polished it dry. She soaked the towels in the tub and then cleaned that too. The motel room hadn't been this clean since before Eleanor was born.

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But Lenny. He wasn't big but he was a dead weight and it took a lot of effort just to get him over to the door. There were no other cars anywhere near this wing of the motel and everything outside was dark. Eleanor turned off the lights inside the room and opened the door cautiously.

She was ready to die herself by the time she dragged Lenny around the back. Heaving, she sat down in the scrub grass and rested her head on her arms. Why did the pig have to eat almost the whole pizza? Now he weighed a ton. The tears rolled down her cheeks. She was exhausted from all the cleaning and getting Lenny this far; she just couldn't drag him any farther. She'd be caught. She might as well call her mother right now. Eleanor moaned. She couldn't.

It took forever but she finally got Lenny across the field and down to the river. In the dark it oiled past Eleanor, black and dangerous. If this was *The Sopranos,* of course she'd have cement, but Lenny would just have to sink or swim on his own. Eleanor rolled him in.

She crept back to the room and there it was. The car!

Eleanor was so tired she could hardly think. That's what always happened to detectives—they got so involved in a case they stayed up all night working it, having insomnia, ruining their personal lives. Eleanor knew just how they felt. But she had to do something with the car.

Eleanor imagined driving the car to her home and slipping it into the garage, she was that bone-tired. But the thought of her mother—"Eleanor Louise, this is totally unacceptable!"—stifled her giggles.

She would have to drive it somewhere and ditch it. Eleanor sighed and got the cleaning supplies back out.

"A woman's work is never done," she heard her mother say. Wasn't that the truth.

Eleanor decided she would ditch the vehicle halfway home and walk from there. The car was a cheap rental that Lenny had somehow managed to get under false ID, and it could probably never be traced to him. That was harder than most people thought; Eleanor had learned this from *Columbo.*

Eleanor gathered the duffel, her knapsack, and the bag of garbage from the motel room. She wrapped the knife in a tea towel and shoved it in her knapsack to get rid of later. She rinsed out her mother's good black dress, rolled it up in a towel, and put that in her knapsack as well. Standing in her crisp kilt and blouse again, Eleanor looked around the freshly cleaned motel room and thought the maid would thank her.

Satisfied that the car would yield nothing to the crime techs at the police impound lot, and still wearing the rubber dish gloves, Eleanor drove through the waning night to a quiet side street halfway to her home. She set the seat farther back and adjusted

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the mirrors for a taller person. Hah.

From the backseat she retrieved the garbage, duffel, and her knapsack.

Two blocks later she dropped the garbage bag and rubber gloves into a dumpster and cut through a road allowance back to the river. A dirt path ran along this side for miles and she could follow it all the way to her house. The sky was starting to lighten and the air was damp and cold near the water. She opened the duffel and looked inside. Even in the murky dawn the jewels glowed with an otherworldly radiance, and Eleanor recognized that this was the moment that separated the getaways from the convicts.

"Don't go casting pearls before swine," Eleanor heard her mother say as she threw the first handful of jewels across the deep river. They landed on the slick surface like a spatter of raindrops and were gone. The water ate the remaining gems and looked no less hungry for its million-dollar meal.

Just before her own house, Eleanor loaded the duffel with rocks and watched the river suck that into its murk as well. She could practically write the next script for *Blue Murder*.

She dunked her shoes in the river and wiped them as clean as she could in the flattened grass beside the path. She trod lightly across the grass, looking behind to see if she had left any footsteps. The sun was glaring across the field that stretched up to the back of her house now and Eleanor could see no tracks. Just to be safe, she stayed off the dirt path and kept to the scrub grass on the sides, right into her own yard and its cracked cement walkway.

Lights were on both upstairs and down, and Eleanor wondered if there was any chance she could slip inside without her mother noticing. Her mother always got up early, even on her days off, and no doubt had been up for at least an hour by now. Eleanor slipped into the garage. She dried her shoes thoroughly and set them on the rubber mat. She wiped the knife again and hid it down deep in the middle of the garbage, careful not to touch it with her fingers.

Taking a deep breath, she opened the door and stepped into the kitchen. It was as spotless as always, and devoid of her mother. Eleanor heard water running upstairs and realized her mother was having her usual shower following her morning walk. Whew. Eleanor ran upstairs, past the bathroom, where she could hear the shower hissing and the water pipes groaning, and into her mother's room. Quickly she took the good black dress from her knapsack, shook it out, and hung it back in the closet. It didn't look good. Eleanor bit her lip and nearly whimpered. Nothing on television had provided her with the information necessary to deal with this. If only she'd watched Martha Stewart once in a while.

Back in her room Eleanor looked at her bed with longing. She

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was so tired she could die, but there was just no way her mother was going to let her sleep. "You are not going to waste your life lolling about in bed in the middle of the day. Up, missy. Now." That was how her mother referred to eight o'clock in the friggin' morning—the middle of the day. Eleanor sighed and took her schoolbooks out of the knapsack.

When she heard her mother leave the bathroom, Eleanor waited until her mother's door clapped shut. She hurried into the bathroom and checked herself out in the mirror. Her shower back at the motel had removed any traces of blood—or worse, makeup. Her hair was back in its two stubby braids, the Peter Pan collar of her blouse was white, her dental retainer was in place, and she looked like the most absolute dweeb on the face of the earth. Eleanor scowled in disgust and cursed her mother, though it was only lip-synched at the mirror. *Bitch.*

"What are you doing in there?" Her mother's voice pried through the door as she rattled the doorknob.

"Nothing."

"Well then, come out and do something useful."

Eleanor opened the door. Her mother peered at her suspiciously above the basket of dirty laundry she held. For two long seconds Eleanor wondered if there was something she had forgotten, something in her hair or on her face that undid all her careful efforts at concealment.

Her mother pushed the laundry basket into Eleanor's arms. "Make sure the machine's set on cold."

Eleanor had just added the last of her own socks and underwear to the washer when her mother loomed up behind her again.

"I called Tiffany Waddingham's last night, Eleanor. You didn't tell me her parents were in Europe."

"I didn't know."

"*I called twice for you and Tiffany said you weren't there.*"

Eleanor felt like a rabbit staring up into the wolf eyes of her mother. She felt like the cop on the take in *The Wire* when his sergeant catches him hanging with the bad guys. She felt like bolting.

Eleanor's mother narrowed her eyes even further. They were so far beyond narrow it was amazing she could even see Eleanor out of them. "Tiffany promised me you'd return my call when you came up from the pool. Why didn't you? What was I supposed to think? Did Tiffany even give you the message?"

Eleanor would owe Tiffany forever, as many homework assignments as Tiffany wanted. "She probably wrote it down on the memo pad by the phone and then forgot to tell me."

"Well, I can tell you, missy, you won't be going back there for any sleepovers without my establishing that the Waddinghams will be

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there." Eleanor's mother reached out and pinched Eleanor's chin, tilting her daughter's head up towards the overhead fluorescent light. "And you look too tired, you probably stayed up half the night watching television."

Eleanor was slogging through math homework at the kitchen table when the front doorbell rang. She heard her mother's voice and a lower voice, a man's. The Kordas rarely had visitors, and on a Sunday you wouldn't expect salespeople. Mrs. Korda was not on good terms with any of the neighbors, so if it was one of them it would only be a complaint, though complaints usually ran the other direction. Eleanor heard the voices entering the living room. She tilted her chair back, peeked into the living room, and nearly fell over backwards. Two police officers stood on her mother's Oriental carpet.

They had found Leonard Green's body washed up on the riverbank a half-mile downstream from here and they had a search warrant. Lenny was such a jerk that even dead he was causing trouble.

"In his pocket we found diagrams to the jewelry store where you work, Mrs. Korda. Can you explain that?" the big cop with the face like the grumpy store detective at the mall asked.

"Of course not. I don't know what you're talking about."

"So you don't know anything about the robbery that happened at Zamphir's last night?"

"What?!"

Uh-oh. Eleanor bent lower over her math text. How long would it take twelve fruit vendors to sell sixteen bushels of apples each if they sold one apple every five minutes?

"Where were you last night, Mrs. Korda?"

"I was here, at home."

"Alone?" The big cop managed to pack a lot into that one word.

"Yes. My daughter was at a friend's. At the Waddinghams' summer place."

Eleanor almost shook her head at her mother's snooty tone. The cops wouldn't like that. Most people didn't.

"It must be difficult for you to keep up financially with the likes of the Waddinghams, hmm?" The skinny cop could out-snot Eleanor's mother with both hands cuffed behind his back. His dark hair looked oily where it stuck out the back of his hat. Eleanor's mother would not be impressed that he had left his hat on inside her house.

"You had financial worries, Mrs. Korda, since your husband left?"

"How dare you? It is none of your business—"

The door from the garage into the kitchen opened at this moment and another police officer entered. This one was a woman, with a ton of freckles, and she smiled at Eleanor as though to reassure her. The cop had a plastic bag with a pair of rubber boots in it which she carried through to the living room. Eleanor could

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see the woman was losing the fight with the donut devil; if she knew what those cop pants looked like from the back, she might consider another line of work.

"Are these your boots, Mrs. Korda?" The big grump had the bag now and he held it up.

"Yes."

Eleanor was beginning to get a bad feeling. Worse than when her mother's eyes got skinny, almost as bad as the time she ate a whole ice cream cake and then smoked three cigarettes in a row. The universe was not unfolding as it should.

"So you were out last night?"

"Well, I walked along the river."

"Ahh, so you admit you were down by the river."

"Of course I admit it, I walk there every day, rain or shine."

The big cop looked as satisfied as a scratch-and-winner who's just lined up three matching fruit. He handed the bag back to the female cop with a nod of his head. She seemed to know what this meant and headed back out to the garage.

"Mrs. Korda, how many people have keys to Zamphir's Jewelry?"

Eleanor's mother's nose inched higher. "Just the two of us. Mr. Zamphir and I."

"And you have those keys now?"

"Yes. Mr. Zamphir entrusts the opening and the closing of the store only to me."

"Could you get them for us now?"

"Certainly." Eleanor's mother marched down the hallway and then stomped up the stairs. All right for her, but whenever Eleanor made that kind of noise her mother was quick to warn her, "Don't you go giving me any of your attitude, young lady." Now Mrs. Korda was giving the cops more attitude than a gang punk off *The Shield.*

Out of the corner of her eye Eleanor could see the two cops watching her now. She had moved on to the next math problem and she squinted with concentration. Her ankles were crossed demurely, her skirt halfway down her shins, her underwear clean, her braids as tight as her alibi.

The big cop leaned towards the skinny one and spoke in a low tone, but Eleanor could hear him anyway. "Poor kid," he said, and they both shook their heads.

Eleanor's mother was gone longer than she should have been. When she finally came back she had her purse with her.

"I'm sure I had them with me," she said, pawing through her purse again. "I always do."

"You didn't loan them?"

"Of course not! What do you take me for? No one else ever has them except me. I have a position of some responsibility—"

"Can you describe them for us, please, Mrs. Korda."

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"They're on a green leather fob, three keys."

Peeking out from under her bangs, Eleanor caught the look that passed between the two cops and she knew they had found the keys. Lenny must have had them in his pocket. If he hadn't already been dead, Eleanor would have been glad to murder him again right then.

"When was the last time you saw Leonard Green?"

"I already told you, I don't know any Leonard Green. I've never met him."

"Your coworkers say he has been in the jewelry store twice. He spoke to you."

"Well, how am I supposed to remember every person who comes into the store?"

"Your neighbors also confirm you talked with a man fitting his description just last week."

Eleanor ground her teeth. Lenny coming here and talking to her mother! What had that skinny jerk been up to?

Mrs. Korda's eyes did the narrow thing. "Those Pinkleys are the worst busybodies. They should take more care of their yapping dog instead of spying on their neighbors."

"But you were talking to Leonard Green?"

"I didn't know that was his name. I *had* seen him at the store, and then he just appeared on my sidewalk and said it was a coincidence. He is an overly familiar young man and I sent him on his way as soon as I could."

"What did he want?"

Eleanor's mother hesitated, and Eleanor turned to sneak a look at her. Was that a blush?

"I'd rather not say. He was a most presumptuous young man."

"He made advances to you?"

"Exactly."

"And you turned him down?"

"Of course!"

"You're sure? You didn't flirt with him just a little?"

"I most certainly did not." Eleanor saw her mother was sitting with her ankles crossed and her hands folded as if the queen could arrive for a spot check at any moment.

"The other salesclerks at Zamphir's indicate you talked to Leonard Green on two separate occasions, and that you flirted with him."

"How dare they! Those little tarts, they're just jealous of my position at Zamphir's. Oh yes, they'd like to see me gone. Spreading lies . . ."

"Did Leonard Green ask you for the keys to Zamphir's?"

"No."

"Yet his body was found with your keys in his pocket. How do you explain that?"

"I don't. The whole thing is preposterous."

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Eleanor knew her mother shouldn't be talking to these cops without a lawyer. It was too bad her mother hadn't watched more television, because that was one of the first things you learned. Get lawyered up quick.

Eleanor pushed her chair back from the kitchen table and went into the living room.

"Mom?"

"Not now, Eleanor Louise."

"But Mom, what's happening isn't—"

"Never you mind. You have your math to finish, now get to it."

Eleanor hesitated. The two cops' faces were full of pity for her. Eleanor looked at her mother again and saw the fierceness of those thin lips, the searing eyes, and that gross hairdo—it was so bad it was almost retro. That was another thing her mother said, *You can't save a duck that wants to drown.* Unfortunately there was some truth in that.

The female cop came down from upstairs as Eleanor was heading back to her homework. In one hand she held the little black light for illuminating blood that Eleanor recognized from *CSI.* In the other she had the good black dress in a plastic bag but Eleanor knew it wouldn't be going to the dry cleaner's as it should.

Eleanor couldn't hear what she said to the big cop, but she could guess. Eleanor was pretty good at guessing. Eleanor shifted her eyes away from the problem of how many ten-inch-wide boards it would take to side a 5,000-square-foot house. The Kordas' house was stucco and it wasn't even a quarter that size. The female cop went back out into the garage.

"This is your dress, Mrs. Korda?"

"Well, it's not the neighbor's."

Eleanor almost clucked. There was that attitude again.

"It appears to have blood on it. Did you accidentally spill any blood on it recently?"

"This is ridiculous. There is no way my dress could have that young man's blood on it."

"You're suggesting someone else planted this evidence?"

Eleanor nearly bit through the tip of her tongue, which was sticking out the way she liked to do to help her figure out math problems.

"Those jealous clerks at Zamphir's. They'd do anything to get rid of me. They're trying to set me up—"

"You expect us to believe this is a conspiracy?"

"You're making a mistake, young man!"

Eleanor couldn't stand it any longer. She slid back into the living room and took a deep breath.

"Mom—"

"Not now!" Eleanor's mother almost roared.

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Eleanor's eyes filled with tears. The cops looked embarrassed, and the big one scowled even harder at Mrs. Korda.

"But Mom, I have to tell you something."

"Don't make me do something we'll both regret, missy."

Eleanor hesitated.

"I'm warning you," her mother said. Eleanor had always found that when her mother warned her, it was best to pay attention. She sighed and hung her head.

The big cop's scowl was replaced by a satisfied grin when the female cop came in from the garage with the knife.

Eleanor felt sad as she thought of her mother in jail. Tears filmed her eyes so she couldn't read the next math problem.

"Now, young lady, quit feeling sorry for yourself," her mother would say. "Look on the bright side." And for once it was true. At least her mother would never find out Eleanor had misbehaved. ●

Clean Sweep

by Debbie DiBacco

I'm afraid of the thoughts that go round in my head,
For more and more often, I think of you dead.
With bludgeon, with hammer, with poison and pain,
You've much to lose; I've much to gain.

My home will be quiet, my kitchen so clean.
My floors will have that "just polished" sheen.
The only opinion that counts will be mine.
No compromise, no sharing, oh, won't that be fine!

So how shall I do it and when will it be?
Well, that will be up to both you and to me.

Take those muddy shoes off; put a dish in the sink;
Pick up after yourself; maybe buy me a mink.
Those rings round the bathtub will just have to go;
Now do you understand what maddens me so?

I'm patient; I've given chances—all that I can.
But I'm tired of hearing, "I'm a typical man."
It's no fun following you round with a broom,
Crumbs fall from your mouth as you move room to room!

So the next time you see my eyes start to flash,
It's that exact moment that could be your last. ●

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Art by Allen Davis

THE WESTPHALIAN RING

by Jeffery Deaver

The Charing Cross burglary had been the most successful of his career.

And, as he was now learning, it would perhaps be the one that would permanently end this vocation.

As well as earn him a trip to a fetid cell in Newgate prison.

Sitting in his chockablock shop off Great Portland Street, wiry Peter Goodcastle tugged at the tuft of wispy hair above his ear and below his bald head and nodded grimly at his visitor's words, just audible amid the sound of Her Majesty's Public Works' grimy steam hammer breaking up the brick road to repair a water main.

"The man you robbed," his uneasy companion continued, "was the benefactor to the Earl of Devon. And has connections of his own throughout Parliament and Whitehall Street. The queen speaks highly of him."

The forty-four-year-old Goodcastle knew this, and considerably more, about Lord Robert Mayhew, as he did all his burglary victims. He always learned as much as he could about them; good intelligence was yet one more skill that had kept him free from

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Scotland Yard's scrutiny in the twelve years since he'd returned from the war and begun plying his trade as a thief. He'd sought as much data as he could about Mayhew and learned that he was indeed well regarded in the upper circles of London society and among the royals, including Queen Victoria herself. Still, because of the man's massive wealth and obsession for amassing and hoarding rare jewelry and valuables, Goodcastle assessed, the rewards would be worth the risk.

But in this estimate he'd clearly been wrong.

"It's the ring he's upset about. Not the other pieces, certainly not the sovereigns. No, the ring. He's using all his resources to find it. Apparently it was handed down to him by his father, who received it from his father. It's of great personal value to him."

It was, of course, always wiser to filch items to which the owners had no sentimental attachment, and Goodcastle had decided that the ring fell into such a category because he'd found it sitting in a cheap, unlocked box on Mayhew's dressing-counter, covered by a dozen pieces of worthless costume jewelry and cuff links.

But the thief now concluded that the casual treatment was merely a clever ruse to better protect the precious item—though only from thieves less skilled than Goodcastle, of course; he had inherited the family antiquities business ten years ago and of necessity had become an expert in valuing such items as music boxes, silver, furniture . . . and old jewelry. Standing masked in Mayhew's dressing chamber, he'd frozen in shock as he uncovered the treasure.

Crafted by the famed goldsmith Wilhelm Schroeder of Westphalia early in the century, the ring featured bands of gold alternating with those of silver. Upon the gold were set diamonds; upon the silver, deep-blue sapphires. So astonished and delighted was Goodcastle at this find that he took only it, a diamond cravat pin, a modest broach, and fifty gold guineas, eschewing the many other *objets d'art,* pieces of jewelry, and gold and silver coin cluttering Mayhew's boudoir (another rule of thievery: The more modest the take, the more likely that weeks or months will pass before the victim discovers his loss, if indeed he ever does).

Jeffery Deaver is the modern-day master of the twist ending, but we should warn readers that there's a sort of genre heresy committed in the twist in this one—quite intentionally and all in fun. Mr. Deaver's lastest novel, *Garden of Beasts,* is a thriller set in Berlin in 1936, just before the Nazi Olympics. Like many of his books, it will be released first in Europe, but is expected in U.S. bookstores by July. Just out in paperback: 2003's *The Vanished Man.* †

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This was what he had hoped had occurred in the Charing Cross burglary. The incident had occurred last Thursday and Goodcastle had seen no reports of the theft in the *Daily Telegraph,* the *Times,* or other papers.

But sadly, such was not the case, his informant—a man well placed within Scotland Yard itself—was now explaining.

"What's more," the man whispered, fiddling with the brim of his homburg and looking out over the cool gray April sky of London, "I've heard that the inspectors have reason to believe that the thief has a connection to the furniture or antiquities trade."

Alarmed, Goodcastle whispered, "How on earth can they have found that? An informant?"

"No, the coppers discovered in Sir Mayhew's apartment certain clues that led them to that conclusion."

"Clues? What clues?" As always, Goodcastle had been meticulous in leaving nothing of his own behind. He'd taken all his tools and articles of clothing with him. And he never carried a single document or other token that would lead the police to him or to Goodcastle Antiquities.

But his confederate now chilled the burglar's blood further with the explanation. "The inspectors found bits of various substances on the ladder and in the bedroom and dressing room. I understand one was a bit of cut and desiccated horsehair, of the sort used in stuffing upholstered divans, sofas, and settees, though Mayhew has none of that kind. Also, they located some wax unique to furniture polishing and of a type frequently bought in bulk by craftsmen who repair, refurbish, or sell wooden pieces. . . . Oh, and they discovered some red brick dust, too. It was on the rungs of the ladder. And the constables could find no similar dust on any of the streets nearby. They think its source was the thief's boots." The man glanced outside the shop at the reddish dust from the pulverized brick covering the sidewalk.

Goodcastle sighed angrily at his own foolishness. He'd replaced the ladder exactly as he'd found it in Mayhew's carriage house, but had not thought to wipe off any materials transferred from his shoes.

The year was 1892 and, as the world hurtled toward the start of a new millennium, one could see astonishing scientific advances everywhere. Electric lighting, petroleum-driven vehicles replacing horse-drawn landaus and carriages, magic-lantern moving pictures . . . It was only natural that Scotland Yard, too, would seek out the latest techniques of science in their pursuit of criminals.

Had he known before the job that the Yard was adopting this approach, he could have taken precautions: washing his hands and scrubbing his boots, for instance.

"Do you know anything more?" he asked his informant.

"No, sir. I'm still in the debtors'-crimes department of the Yard.

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What I know about this case is only as I have overheard in fragments of conversation. I fear I can't inquire further without arousing suspicion."

"Of course, I understand. Thank you for this."

"You've been very generous to me, sir. What are you going to do?"

"I honestly don't know, my friend. Perhaps I'll have to leave the country for the Continent—France, most likely." He looked his informant over and frowned. "It occurs to me that you should depart. From what you've told me, the authorities might very well be on their way here."

"But London is a massive city, sir. Don't you think it's unlikely they will beat a path to your door?"

"I would have believed so if they hadn't displayed such diligence in their examination of Mayhew's apartment. Thinking as we now know they do, if I were a Yard inspector, I would simply get a list of the queen's public works currently underway or ascertain the location of any brick buildings being demolished and compare that with lists of furniture and antiquities dealers in the vicinity. That would indeed lead very near to my door."

"Yes, that would make sense. . . . Frightful business, this." The man rose, putting his hat on his head. "And what will happen to you if they arrive here, Mr. Goodcastle?"

Arrested and imprisoned, of course, the shopkeeper thought. But he said, "I will hope for the best. Now, you should leave, and I think it wiser if we don't see each other again. There is no reason for you to go to the dock at criminal court as well."

The nervous man leapt up. He shook Goodcastle's hand. "If you do leave the country, sir, I wish you the best of luck."

The burglar gave the informant a handful of sovereigns, a bonus well above what he'd already paid him.

"God bless, sir."

"I could most assuredly use His assistance in this matter."

The man left quickly. Goodcastle looked after him, half expecting to see a dozen constables and inspectors surrounding his shop, but all he observed were the public-works laborers in their grimy overalls, carting away the shattered brick from the powerful chisel of the steam hammer, and a few passersby, their black brollies unfurled to fend off the sporadic spring rain.

The shop deserted at the moment and his chief craftsman, Boyle, in the back, at work, the shopkeeper slipped into his office and opened the safe hidden behind a Turkish rug he'd mounted on the wall and further concealed behind a panel of oak constructed to resemble part of the wall.

He extracted a cloth bag containing several pieces from recent burglaries, including the cravat stickpin, the broach, the guineas, and the magnificent Westphalian ring from Mayhew's apartment.

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The other items paled in comparison to the German ring. The light from the gas lamp hit the gems and fired a fusillade of beams, white and blue, into the room. The Frenchman to whom Goodcastle had arranged to sell it would pay him three thousand pounds, which meant, of course, that it was worth many times that. Yet Peter Goodcastle reflected that as marvelous as this creation was, it had no particular appeal to him personally. Indeed, once he'd successfully executed a burglary of an abode or museum or shop he cared little for the object he'd made off with, except as it provided income and thus the means to continue his felonious vocation, though even regarding his recompense, he was far from greedy. Why, receiving three thousand sovereigns for the ring, or its true value of perhaps thirty thousand, or merely a handful of crowns wasn't the point. No, the allure to Goodcastle was the act of the theft and the perfection of its execution.

One might wonder how exactly he had chosen this curious line of work. Goodcastle's history revealed some privilege and a fine education. Nor had he rubbed shoulders with any particularly rough crowds at any point in his life. His parents, both long deceased, had been loving, and his brother was, of all things, a parish priest in Yorkshire. He supposed much of the motivation propelling him to steal could be traced to his terrible experiences during the Second Afghan War.

Goodcastle had been a gunner with the famed Royal Horse Artillery, which was among the detachments ordered to stop an enemy force of ghazis intent on attacking the British garrison at Kandahar. On the searingly hot, dusty day of 27 July, 1880, the force of 2,500 British and Indian infantry, light cavalry, and artillery met the enemy at Maiwand. What they did not realize until the engagement began, however, was that the Afghans outnumbered them ten to one. From the very beginning the battle went badly, for in addition to overwhelming numbers of fanatical troops, the enemy had not only smoothbores, but Krupp guns. The ghazis pinpointed their weapons with deadly accuracy, and the shells and the blizzard of musket balls and repeater rounds ravaged the British forces.

Manning gun number three, Goodcastle's crew suffered terribly but managed to fire over one hundred rounds that day, the barrel of the weapon hot enough to cook flesh—as was proven by the severe burns on his men's arms and hands. Finally, though, the overwhelming force of the enemy prevailed. With a pincer maneuver they closed in. The Afghans seized the English cannon, which the British had no time to spike and destroy, as well as the unit's colors—the first time in the history of the British army such a horror had occurred.

As Goodcastle and the others fled in a terrible rout, the ghazis turned the British guns around and augmented the carnage, with the Afghans using the flagpoles from the regiment's own flags as

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ramming rods for the shot!

A horrific experience, yes—twenty percent of the Horse Artillery was lost, as was sixty percent of the 66th Foot Regiment—but in some ways the worst was visited upon the surviving soldiers only after their return to England. Goodcastle found himself and his comrades treated as pariahs, branded cowards. The disdain mystified as much as it devastated their souls. But Goodcastle soon learned the reason for it. Prime Minister Disraeli, backed by a number of lords and the wealthy upper class, had been the prime mover in the military intervention in Afghanistan, which served no purpose whatsoever except to rattle sabers at Russia, then making incursions into the area. The loss at Maiwand made many people question the wisdom of such involvement and was an instant political embarrassment. Scapegoats were needed, and who better than the line troops who were present at one of the worst defeats in British history?

One particular nobleman infuriated Goodcastle by certain remarks made to the press, cruelly bemoaning the shame the troops had brought to the nation and offering not a word of sympathy for those who lost life or limb. The shopkeeper was so livid that he vowed revenge. But he'd had enough of death and violence at Maiwand and would never, in any case, injure an unarmed opponent, so he decided to punish the man in a subtler way. He found his residence, and a month after the improvident remarks the gentleman discovered that a cache of sovereigns—hidden, not very cleverly, in a vase in his office—was considerably diminished.

Not long after this, a factory owner reneged on promises of employment to a half-dozen veterans of the Afghan campaign. The industrialist, too, paid dearly—with a painting, which Goodcastle stole from his summer house in Kent and sold, the proceeds divvied up among those who'd been denied work. (Goodcastle's experience in his father's antiquities business stood him in good stead; despite the veterans' concern about the questionable quality of the canvas, done by some Frenchman named Claude Monet, the thief was able to convince an American dealer to pay dearly for the blurred landscape.)

The vindication these thefts represented certainly cheered him—but Goodcastle finally came to admit that what appealed most deeply wasn't revenge or the exacting of justice but the exhilaration of the experience itself. . . . Why, a well-executed burglary could be a thing of beauty, as much so as any hand-carved armoire or Fragonard painting or William Tessler gold broach. He tamed his guilt and began pursuing his new calling with as much vigor and cunning as was displayed by all men, in whatever profession, who were counted successful.

Once he inherited the familial shop on Great Portland Street, he

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found that he and his workers had unique access to the finest town homes in metropolitan London, as they collected and delivered furniture—perfect hunting grounds for a refined burglar. He was too clever to rob his own clients, of course, but he would listen and observe, learning what he might about these customers' neighbors or acquaintances—any recent valuables they'd purchased, sums of money they'd come into, where they might secrete their most precious objects, when they regularly traveled out of London, the number and nature of grooms and waiting-servants and guard hounds.

A brilliant idea, and perfectly executed on many occasions. As on Thursday last in the apartment of Sir Robert Mayhew.

But it is often not the plan itself that goes awry, but an entirely unforeseen occurrence that derails a venture. In this case, the unexpected cleverness of Scotland Yard inspectors.

Goodcastle now replaced the Westphalian ring and the other items in the safe and counted the cash inside. Five hundred pounds. At his home in London he had another three thousand sovereigns, plus other valuable items he'd stolen recently but hadn't yet found buyers for. In his country house was another five thousand quid. That would set him up easily in the southern provinces of France, where he spent time with Lydia, the raven-haired beauty from Manchester he often traveled with. She could join him there permanently when she'd settled her own business affairs.

But living forever in France? His heart sank at the thought. Peter Goodcastle was an Englishman through and through. For all its sooty air from the dark engines of industry, its snobbish elite, its imperialism, his shabby treatment after Maiwand, he still loved England.

But he would not love ten years in Newgate.

He swung the safe door shut and closed the secret panel, letting the tapestry fall back over it. Caught in furious debate about what he might do, he wandered out into his shop once again, finding comfort in the many fine objects offered for sale.

An hour later, having come to no decision as to a course of action, he was wondering if perhaps he'd been wrong about the prowess of the police. Maybe they had hit on some lucky initial conclusions, but the investigation had stalled and he would escape unscathed. But it was then that a customer walked into the shop and began to browse. The shopkeeper smiled a greeting, then bent over a ledger in concentration, but he continued to keep an eye on the customer, a tall, slim man in a black greatcoat over a similarly shaded morning suit and white shirt. He was carefully examining the clocks and music boxes and walking sticks with the eye of someone intent on buying something and getting good value for his money.

As a thief, Peter Goodcastle had learned to be observant of

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detail; as a shopkeeper he had come to know customers. He was now struck by a curious fact: The man perused only the wooden items on display, while the inventory consisted of much porcelain, ivory, mother of pearl, pewter, brass, and silver. It had been Goodcastle's experience that a customer desirous of buying a music box, say, would look at all varieties of such items, to assess their value and quality in general, even if his intent was to acquire a wooden one.

Goodcastle then noted something else. The man was subtly running his finger along a crevice in the seam of a music box. So, his interest wasn't in the wood itself but in the wax covering it, a sample of which he captured under his nail.

The "customer" was not that at all, the shopkeeper understood with dismay; he was one of the Scotland Yard inspectors his informant had told him about earlier.

Well, all is not lost yet, Goodcastle reasoned. The wax he used was somewhat rare, due to its price and availability only in commercial quantities, but it was hardly unique; many other furniture and antiquities dealers bought the same substance. This was not by any means conclusive evidence of his guilt.

But then the policeman took a fancy to a red overstuffed chair. He sat on it and patted the sides, as if getting a feel for its construction. He sat back and closed his eyes. In horror Goodcastle noted that the man's right hand disappeared out of sight momentarily and subtly plucked a piece of the stuffing out of the cushion.

The substance was desiccated horsehair, which surely would match the piece found in Robert Mayhew's apartment.

The inspector rose and prowled up and down the aisles for some moments longer. Finally he glanced toward the counter. "You are Mr. Goodcastle?"

"I am indeed," the shopkeeper said, for to deny it would merely arouse suspicion at a later time. He wondered if he was about to be arrested on the spot. His heart beat fiercely.

"You have a fine shop here." The inspector was attempting to be amiable but Goodcastle detected the coldness of an inquisitor in his eyes.

"Thank you, sir. I should be most glad to assist you." His palms began to sweat and he felt ill within the belly.

"No, thank you. In fact, I must be going."

"Good day. Do return."

"I shall," he said, and walked outside into the brisk spring air.

Goodcastle stepped back into the shadows between two armoires and looked out.

No!

His worst fears were realized. The man had started across the street, glanced back into the store, and, not seeing the proprietor, knelt, presumably to tie his shoelace. But the lace was perfectly

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secured already; the point of this gesture was to pinch up some of the brick dust from the construction currently being undertaken—to match against similar dust Goodcastle had left on the rungs of the ladder or inside the apartment in Charing Cross, he thought in agony. The policeman deposited the dust in a small envelope and then continued on his way, with the jaunty step of a man who has just found a wad of banknotes on the street.

Panic fluttered within Goodcastle. He understood his arrest was imminent. So, it was to be a race to escape the clutch of the law. Every second counted.

He strode to the back door of the shop and opened it. "Boyle," he called into the back room, where the round, bearded craftsman was putting a coat of lacquer on a Chinese-style bureau. "Mind the shop for an hour or two. I have an urgent errand."

Bill Sloat was hunched over his cluttered, ale-stained table at the Green Man pub, surrounded by a half-dozen of his cronies, all of them dirty and dim, half-baked Falstaffs, their only earthly reason for being here that they did Sloat's bidding as quickly and as ruthlessly as he ordered.

The gang man, dressed in an unwashed old sack suit, looked up as Peter Goodcastle approached and pierced a bit of apple with his sharp toadsticker, eating the mealy fruit slowly. He didn't know much about Goodcastle except that he was one of the few merchants on Great Portland Street who coughed up his weekly ten quid—which he called a "business fee"—and didn't need a good kick in the arse or slash with a razor to be reminded of it.

The shopkeeper stopped at the table and nodded at the fat man, who muttered, "What's brought you 'ere, m'lord?"

The title was ironic, of course. Goodcastle didn't have a drop of noble blood in his limp veins. But in a city where class was the main yardstick by which to measure a man, more so even than money, Goodcastle swam in a very different stream than Sloat. The gang man's East-End upbringing had been grim and he'd never gotten a lick of boost, unlike Goodcastle, whose parents had come from a pleasant part of Surrey. Which was reason enough for Sloat to dislike him, despite the fact he coughed up his quid on time.

"I need to speak to you."

"Do you now? Speak away, mate. Me ear's yours."

"Alone."

Sloat harpooned another piece of apple and chewed it down, then muttered, "Leave us, boys." He grunted toward the ruffians around the table, and, snickering or grumbling, they moved away with their pints.

He looked Goodcastle over carefully. The man was trying his hardest to be a carefree bloke but he clearly had a desperate air

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about him. Ah, this was tidy! Desperation and its cousin fear were far better motivators than greed for getting men to do what you wanted. Sloat pointed toward Goodcastle with a blunt finger that ended in a nail darkened from the soot that fell in this part of town like black snow. "You'll come a cropper if you're 'ere to say you don't 'ave me crust this week."

"No, no, no. I'll have your money. It's not that." A whisper: "Hear me out, Sloat. I'm in trouble. I need to get out of the country quickly, without anybody knowing. I'll pay you handsomely if you can arrange it."

"Oh, me dear friend, whatever I do for you, you'll pay 'andsomely," he said, laughing. "Rest assured of that. What'd you do, mate, to need a 'oliday so quick like?"

"I can't tell you."

"Ey, too shy to share the story with your friend Bill? You cuckold some poor bloke? You owe a sack of lolly to a gambler? . . ." Then Sloat squinted and laughed harshly. "But no, m'lord. You're too bald and too skinny to get a married bird to shag. And your cobblers ain't big enough for you to go wagering more'n a farthing. So, who's after you, mate?"

"I can't say," he whispered.

Sloat sipped more of his bitters. "No matter. Get on with it. It's me dinnertime and I 'ave a 'unger."

Goodcastle looked around and his voice lowered even further. "I need to get into France. Nobody can know. And I need to leave tonight."

"Tonight?" The ruffian shook his head. "Lord love me."

"I heard you have connections all over the docks."

"Bill's got 'is connections. That 'e does."

"Can you get me onto a cargo ship bound for Marseilles?"

"That's a bleedin' tall order, mate."

"I don't have any choice."

"Well, now, I might be able to." He thought for a moment. "It'll cost you a thousand quid."

"What?"

"It's bloody noon, mate. Look at the clock. It ain't easy, what you're asking, you know. I'll 'ave to run around all day like a chicken without its 'ead. Blimey. Not to mention the risk. The docks're lousy with guards, customs agents, sergeants at arms—thick as fleas, they are. . . . So there you 'ave it, gov'nor. A thousand." He skewered another brown apple wedge and chewed it down.

"All right." Goodcastle said, scowling. The men shook hands.

"I need something up front. 'Ave to paint some palms, understand."

Goodcastle pulled out his money purse and counted out some coin.

"Crikey, guv'nor." Bill laughed. The massive hand reached out and snatched the whole purse. "Thank'ee much. . . . Now, when do

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I get the rest?"

Goodcastle glanced at his pocket watch. "I can have it by four. Can you make the arrangements by then?"

"Rest assured I can," Sloat said, waving for the barmaid.

"Come by the shop."

Sloat squinted and looked the man over warily. "Maybe you won't own up to what you done, but tell me, mate, just 'ow safe is it to be meetin' you?"

The shopkeeper gave a grim laugh. "You've heard the expression 'giving somebody a taste of their own medicine'?"

"I 'ave, sure."

"Well, that's what I'm going to do. Don't worry. I know how to make sure we're alone."

Goodcastle sighed once more and then left the Green Man.

Sloat watched him leave, thinking, *A thousand quid for a few hours' work.*

Desperation, he thought, is just plain bloody beautiful.

At five minutes to four that afternoon, Peter Goodcastle was uneasily awaiting Bill Sloat's arrival.

While he'd made his arrangements to evade the law, Goodcastle had kept up the appearance of going through his business as usual. But he'd continued to observe the street outside. Sure enough, he'd noted several plain-clothed detectives standing well back in the shadows. They pretended to be watching the construction work on the street, but in fact it was obvious that their attention was mostly on Goodcastle and the store.

The shopkeeper now put his plan into action. He summoned Boyle and one of the men he regularly used for transporting furniture to and from clients' houses. Purposely acting suspiciously, like an actor in a one-shilling melodrama, Goodcastle slipped the young deliveryman a paper-wrapped package, which contained a music box. He gave instructions to take it to Goodcastle's own house as quickly as possible. Witnessing the apparently furtive mission, and probably assuming that the box contained loot or damning evidence, one of the detectives started after the young man as soon as he left the shop.

Goodcastle then dismissed Boyle for the day and gave him a similar package, with instructions to take it home with him and make sure the music box mechanism was dependable. The remaining detective observed Boyle leave the shop, clutching the parcel, and, after a moment of debate, appeared to decide it was better to pursue this potential source of evidence rather than remain at his station.

Goodcastle carefully perused the street and saw no more detectives. The workers had left and the avenue was deserted except for

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a married couple, who paused at the front window, then stepped inside. As they looked over the armoires, Goodcastle told them he would return in a moment and, with another glance outside into the empty street, stole into the office, closing the door behind him.

He sat at his desk, lifted aside the Turkish rug, and opened the secret panel and then the safe. He was just reaching inside when he was aware of a breeze wafting on his face, and he knew the door to the office had been opened.

Goodcastle leapt up, crying, "No!" He was staring at the husband of the couple who'd just walked into the shop. He was holding a large Webley pistol.

"Lord in heaven!" Goodcastle said, gasping. "You've come to rob me!"

"No, sir, I'm here to arrest you," he said calmly. "Pray don't move. I don't wish to harm you. But I will if you give me no choice." He then blew into a police whistle, which uttered a shrill tone.

A moment later, beyond him, Goodcastle could see the door burst open, and in ran two Scotland Yard inspectors in plain clothes, as well as two uniformed constables. The woman—who'd obviously been posing as the first inspector's wife—waved them toward the office. "The safe is back there," she called.

"Capital!" called one inspector—the lean, dark man who'd been in the store earlier, masquerading as a customer. His fellow officer, wearing a bowler, was dressed similarly, a greatcoat over a morning suit, though this man differed in his physique, being taller and quite pale, with a shock of flaxen hair. Both policemen took the shopkeeper by the arms and led him out into the store proper.

"What's the meaning of this?" Goodcastle blustered.

The white-faced inspector chuckled. "I warrant you know right well."

They searched him and, finding no weapons, unhanded him. The inspector who'd entered with the woman on his arm replaced his Webley with a notebook, in which he began taking down evidence. They dismissed the woman with effusive thanks and she explained that she'd be back at the police precinct station house if they needed her further.

"What is this about?" Goodcastle demanded.

The pale officer deferred to the lean one, apparently a chief inspector, who looked Goodcastle over carefully. "So you're the man who burglarized Robert Mayhew's apartment."

"Who? I swear I don't know what you're speaking of."

"Please, Mr. Goodcastle, don't malign our intelligence. You saw me in your shop earlier, did you not?"

"Yes."

"During that visit here I managed to collect a sample of furniture wax from several wooden pieces. The substance is identical to

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the wax we found traces of in Lord Mayhew's dressing chamber—a material that neither he nor his servants had ever been in contact with. We found, too, a horse hair that matched one that I extracted from your chair."

"I'm at a loss—"

"And what do you have to say about the fact that the brick dust in front of your store is the same as that which we found on the rungs of the ladder used to break into Lord Mayhew's first floor? Don't deny you are the thief."

"Of course I deny it. This is absurd!"

"Go search the safe," the chief inspector said to a constable, nodding toward the back office. He then explained, "When I was here earlier I tried to ascertain where you might have a hiding place for your ill-gotten gains. But your shop boasts far too much inventory and too many nooks and crannies to locate what we are seeking without searching for a week. So we stationed those two detectives outside on the street to make you believe we were about to arrest you. As we had anticipated, you led them off. . . . I assume in pursuit of two parcels of no evidentiary value whatsoever."

"Those deliveries a moment ago?" Goodcastle protested. "I sent one music box home for myself to work on tonight. Another, my man was taking with him to do the same."

"So you say. But I suspect you're prevaricating."

"This is most uncalled for. I—"

"Please, allow me to finish. When you sent our men on a goose chase, that told us that your flight was imminent, so my colleague here and a typist from the precinct house came in as customers, as they'd been waiting to do for several hours." He turned to the policeman who'd played the husband and added, "Capital job, by the way."

"Most kind of you."

The chief inspector turned back to Goodcastle. "You were lulled to incaution by the domestic couple and, prodded by the urgency of escape, you were kind enough to lead us directly to the safe."

"I am, I swear, merely an antiques merchant and craftsman."

The pale detective chuckled again, while the "husband" continued to take everything down in his notebook.

"Sir," the constable said as he stepped from the office. "A problem."

"Is the safe locked?"

"No, sir. The door was open. The trouble is that the ring is not inside."

"Ring?" Goodcastle asked.

"What is inside?" the lean officer asked, ignoring the shopkeeper.

"Money, sir. That's all. About five hundred pounds."

"Are they guineas?"

"No, sir. Varied currency, but notes mostly. No gold."

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"It's the receptacle for my receipts, sirs. Most merchants have one."

Frowning, the head detective looked into the office beyond them and started to speak. But at that moment the door opened again and in strode Bill Sloat. The ruffian took one look at the constables and inspectors and started to flee. He was seized by the two coppers and dragged back inside.

"Ah, look who we have here, Mad Bill Sloat," said the bowlered inspector, lifting an eyebrow in his pale forehead. "We know about you, oh yes. So you're in cahoots with Goodcastle, are you?"

"I am not, copper."

"Keep a respectable tone in your mouth."

Goodcastle said uneasily, "By the queen, sir, Mr. Sloat has done nothing wrong. He comes in sometimes to view my wares. I'm sure that's all he's doing here today."

The chief inspector turned to him. "I sense you're holding back, Goodcastle. Tell us what is on your mind."

"Nothing, truly."

"You'll be in the dock sooner than we have planned for you, sir, if you do not tell us all."

"Keep your flamin' gob shut," Sloat muttered.

"Quiet, you," a constable growled.

"Go on, Goodcastle. Tell us."

The shopkeeper swallowed. He looked away from Sloat. "That man is the terror of Great Portland Street! He extorts money and goods from us and threatens to sic his scoundrels from the Green Man on us if we don't pay. He comes in every Saturday and demands his tithe."

"We've heard rumors of such," the flaxen-haired detective said.

The chief inspector looked closely at Goodcastle. "Yet today is Monday, not Saturday. Why is he here now?"

The villain roared at the shopkeeper, "I'm warning you—"

"One more word and it'll be the Black Maria for you, Sloat."

Goodcastle took a breath and continued. "Last Thursday he surprised me in my shop at eight A.M. I hadn't opened the doors yet, but had come in early because I had finished work on several pieces late the night before and I wanted to wax and polish them before I admitted any customers."

The chief detective nodded, considering this. To his colleagues he said, "The day of the burglary. And not long before it. Pray continue, Goodcastle."

"He made me open the door. He browsed among the music boxes and looked them over carefully. He selected that one right there." He pointed to a rosewood box sitting on the counter. "And he said that in addition to his extortion sterling, this week he was taking that box. But more, I was to build a false compartment in the bottom. It had to be so clever that no one examining the box, however

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carefully, could find what he'd hidden in there." He showed them the box and the compartment—which he'd just finished crafting a half-hour before.

"Did he say what he intended to hide?" the senior Yarder asked.

"He said some items of jewelry and gold coins."

The villain roared, " 'E's a flamin' liar and a brigand and when—"

"Quiet, you," the constable said, and pushed the big man down roughly into a chair.

"Did he say where he'd acquired them?"

"No, sir."

The detectives eyed one another. "So Sloat came here," the senior man offered, "selected the box and got wax on his fingers. The horsehair and brick dust attached themselves to him as well. The timing would allow for his proceeding directly to Lord Mayhew's apartment, where he left those substances."

"It makes sense," the third offered, looking up from his notebook.

The pale detective asked, "And you have no criminal past, Goodcastle? Don't lie. It's easily verified."

"No, sir. I swear. I'm a simple merchant—if I've done anything wrong, it was in not reporting Sloat's extortion. But none of us along Great Portland Street dared. We're too frightened of him. . . . Forgive me, sirs, it's true—I did send the police across the street on a merry chase. I had no idea why they were present but they seemed like detectives to me. I had to get them away from here. Mr. Sloat was due momentarily and I knew that if he noticed the law when he arrived he would think I'd summoned them and might beat me. Or worse."

"Search him," the pale-visaged detective ordered, nodding toward Sloat.

They pulled some coins, a cigar, and a cosh from his pockets, as well as the money purse. The white-faced detective looked inside. "Guineas! Just like the sort that Lord Mayhew lost."

The Royal Mint had stopped producing gold guineas, worth a pound and a shilling, in 1813. They were still legal tender, of course, but were rare. This was why Goodcastle had not taken many from Lord Mayhew's; spending them could draw attention to you.

"That purse is not mine!" Sloat raged. "It's 'is!"

"That's a lie!" Goodcastle cried. "Why, if it were mine, why would you have it? I have mine right here." He displayed a cheap leather pouch containing a few quid, crowns, and pence.

The constable holding the pouch then frowned. "Sir, something else is inside—hidden in a pocket in the bottom." He extracted two items and displayed them. "The cravat pin, like the one Sir Mayhew reported missing. Most surely the same one. And the ruby broach, also taken!"

"I'm innocent, I tell you! Goodcastle 'ere come to me with a story

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of 'aving to get his arse to France tonight."

"And what was the motive for this hasty retreat?" the inscribing detective asked.

" 'E didn't say," Sloat admitted.

"Convenient," the pale detective said wryly. It was clear that they didn't believe the ruffian.

Goodcastle tried to keep a curious and cautious expression on his face. In fact, he was wracked by anxiety, wondering if he could pull off this little theater. He'd had to act fast to save himself. As he'd told Sloat, he was going to treat Scotland Yard to a taste of their own medicine—but not to forsake his homeland and flee to France, which he'd decided he could never do. No, he'd use evidence to connect Sloat to the burglary—through a fabricated story about the music box with the hidden compartment on the one hand and, on the other, making certain Sloat took the incriminating money purse from him at the Green Man.

But would the police accept the theory?

It seemed, for a moment, that they would. But just as Goodcastle began to breathe somewhat easier, the chief inspector turned quickly to him. "Please, sir. Your hands?"

"I beg your pardon?"

"I will examine your hands. One final test in this curious case. I am not yet completely convinced the facts are as they seem."

"Well, yes, of course."

Goodcastle held his palms out, struggling to keep them steady. The detective looked them over. Then he looked up, frowning. After a moment he lowered his head again and smelled Goodcastle's palm. He said to Sloat, "Now yours."

"Listen 'ere, coppers, you bloody well ain't—"

But the constables grabbed the man's beefy hands and lifted them for the chief inspector, who again examined and sniffed. He nodded and then turned slowly to Goodcastle. "You see, the Westphalian ring is of a unique design—silver and gold, unusual in metal craft. Gold, as you know, needs no polishing to prevent tarnish. But silver does. Mayhew told us that the ring had been recently cleaned with a particular type of silver polish that is scented with perfume derived from the lily flower. It is quite expensive, but well within Mayhew's means to buy liberally for his staff to use." Then he turned toward Sloat. "Your hands emit a marked scent of lily and display some small traces of the off-white cream that is the base for the polish, while Mr. Goodcastle's do not. There's no doubt, sir. You are the thief."

"No, no, I am wronged!"

"You may make your case before the judges, sir," the light-haired policeman said, "from the dock."

Goodcastle's heart pounded fiercely from this final matter about

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the polish. He'd nearly overlooked it, but had decided that if the detectives were now so diligent in their use of these minuscule clues to link people to the sites of crimes, Goodcastle needed to be just as conscientious. If a burglar could leave evidence during the commission of a felony, he might also pick up something there that might prove equally damning. He thought back to the ring and Mayhew's dressing chamber. He recalled that he'd recognized the scent of Covey's Tarnish-Preventing Cream in the velvet-lined boxes. On the way to the Green Man, he'd bought some and slathered it liberally on his palm. Shaking Sloat's hand to seal their agreement had transferred some to the ruffian's skin. Before returning to his shop, Goodcastle had scrubbed his own hands clean with lye soap and discarded the remaining polish.

"Cooperate, sir, and it will go easier on you," the hatted detective said to Sloat.

"I'm the victim of a plot!"

"Yes, yes, do you think you're the first brigand ever to suggest that? Where is the ring?"

"I don't know anything of any ring."

"Perhaps we'll find it when we search your house."

No, Goodcastle thought, they wouldn't find the ring. But they would find a half-dozen other pieces stolen by Goodcastle in various burglaries over the past year. Just as they'd find a crude diagram of Robert Mayhew's apartment—drawn with Sloat's own pencil on a sheet of Sloat's own paper. The burglar had planted them there this afternoon after he'd met with the ruffian at the Green Man (taking exemplary care this time to leave no traces that would link him to that incursion).

"Put him in darbies and take him to the hoosegow," the pale officer ordered.

The constables slapped irons on the man's wrists and took him away, struggling.

Goodcastle shook his head. "Do they always protest their innocence so vehemently?"

"Usually. It's only in court they turn sorrowful. And that's when the judge is about to pass sentence," said the pale officer. He added, "Forgive us, Mr. Goodcastle, you've been most patient. But you can understand the confusion."

"Of course. I'm pleased that that fellow is finally off the streets. I regret that I didn't have the courage to come forward before."

"A respectable gentleman such as yourself," offered the detective with the notebook, "can be easily excused on such a count, being alien to the world of crime."

"Well, my thanks to you and all the rest at Scotland Yard," he said to the chief inspector.

But the man gave a laugh and turned toward the pale detective,

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who said, "Oh, you're under a misapprehension, Mr. Goodcastle. Only I am with the Yard. My companions here are private consultants retained by Sir Robert Mayhew. I am Inspector Gregson." He then nodded toward the dark, slim man Goodcastle had taken to be the chief detective. "And this is the consulting detective Sherlock Holmes."

"A pleasure," Goodcastle said. "I believe I've heard of you."

"Indeed," Holmes replied, as if a shopkeeper should most certainly have heard of him. The man seemed like a don at King's College, brilliant but constantly distracted by complex thoughts.

Gregson nodded toward the man who had portrayed the husband and introduced Dr. John Watson, who shook Goodcastle's hand cordially and asked a few more questions about Bill Sloat, the answers to which he jotted into his notebook. He explained that he often wrote accounts of the more interesting cases he and Holmes were involved in.

"Yes, of course. That's where I've heard of you both. The accounts are often published in the newspapers. So that is you! An honor."

"Ah," said Holmes, managing to summon a look simultaneously prideful and modest.

Goodcastle asked, "Will this be one adventure you write about?"

"No, it will not," Holmes said. He seemed piqued—perhaps because, even though a villain was under arrest, his reading of the clues had led to the wrong suspect, at least in his perception of the affair.

"But where, Holmes, is the ring?" Gregson asked.

"I suspect that that Sloat has already disposed of it."

"Why do you think so?" Watson asked.

"Elementary," Holmes said. "He had the other ill-gotten gains on his person. Why not the ring, too? I deduced from his clothing that the blackguard lives in the company of a woman; both the jacket and trousers of his sack suit had been darned with identical stitching, though in places that wear through at different rates—the elbow and the inseam—suggesting that they were repaired by the same person, though at different times. The conclusion must be that a wife or female companion did the work. His request of Mr. Goodcastle here regarding the secret compartment makes clear that he does not trust people, so he would be loathe to leave the ring in an abode where another person dwells and would have kept it on him until the special music box was ready. Since he doesn't have the ring on him any longer, we can conclude that he has disposed of it. And since he has no significant sums of cash with him, other than Lord Mayhew's guineas, we can conclude that he used the ring to settle an old debt."

"Where did he dispose of it, do you think?"

"Alas, I'm afraid that the piece is on its way overseas."

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When the others glanced at each other quizzically, Holmes continued, "You observed, of course, the fish scales on Sloat's cuffs?"

"Well," said Gregson, "I'm afraid I, for one, did not."

"Nor I," Watson said.

"They were scales unique to saltwater fish."

"You knew that, Holmes?" the Yarder asked.

"Data, data, data," the man replied petulantly. "In this line of work, Gregson, one must fill one's mind with facts, but only those that may perchance bear on a criminal venture. Now, the scales could mean nothing more than that he'd walked past a fishmonger. But you certainly observed the streaks of pitch on his shoes, did you not?" When the others merely shook their heads, Holmes sighed, his visage filled with exasperation. He continued. "You gentlemen know the expression, 'devil to pay.'"

"Of course."

"The figurative meaning is 'to suffer consequences.' But most people don't know its literal derivation. The phrase has nothing to do with handing money over to fallen angels. The devil is that portion of a sailing vessel between the inner and outer hulls. To 'pay' it is to paint the outer seams with hot pitch to make them watertight. Obviously climbing between the hulls is an unpleasant and dangerous job, usually meted out as punishment to errant sailors. The pitch used is unique and found only around the waterfront. Because of the fish scales and the tar, I knew that Sloat had been to the docks within the past several hours. The most logical conclusion is that he owed the captain of a smuggling vessel some significant sum of money and traded the ring to him in exchange for the extinguishing of the debt." Holmes shook his head. "The ring could be on any one of dozens of ships and all of them out of our jurisdiction. I'm afraid Lord Mayhew will have to look to Lloyd's to make himself whole in this matter. In the future, let us hope, he will use better locks upon his windows and doors."

"Brilliant deductions," said Gregson of the white face and flaxen hair.

Indeed it was, Goodcastle noted, despite the fact that it was completely incorrect.

Holmes pulled a cherrywood pipe from his pocket, lit it, and started for the door. He paused, glanced around the shop, and turned back to Goodcastle, his eyebrow cocked. "Sir, perhaps you can help me in another matter. Since you deal in music boxes . . . I have been on the lookout for a particular box a client of mine once expressed interest in. It is in the shape of an octagon on a gold base. It plays a melody from 'The Magic Flute' by Mozart and was made by Edward Gastwold in York in eighteen fifty-six. The box is rosewood and is inlaid with ivory."

Goodcastle thought for a moment. "I'm sorry to say that I'm not

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familiar with that particular piece. I've never been fortunate enough to come upon any of Gastwold's creations, though I hear they're marvelous. I certainly can make inquiries. If they bear fruit, shall I contact you?"

"Please." Holmes handed the shopkeeper a card. "My client would pay dearly for the box itself or would offer a handsome finder's charge to anyone who could direct him toward the owner."

Goodcastle put the card in a small box next to his till, reflecting: What a clever man this Holmes is. The Gastwold music box was not well known; for years it had been in the possession of the man who owned the massive Southland Metalworks Ltd. in Sussex. In doing his research into Sir Mayhew's life in preparation for the burglary, he'd learned that Mayhew was a major stockholder in Southland.

Holmes had asked a simple, seemingly innocent question, in hopes that Goodcastle would blurt out that, indeed, he knew of the box and its owner.

Which would have suggested that he might have delved, however subtly, into Mayhew's affairs.

Surely Holmes had no such client. Yet still he knew of the box. Apparently he'd taught himself about music boxes just in case facts about such items came in useful—exactly as Goodcastle did when preparing for his burglaries. ("Data, data, data," Holmes had said; how true!)

Goodcastle said to them, "Well, good day, gentlemen."

"And to you, sir. Our apologies." It was the amiable Dr. Watson who offered this.

"Not at all," Goodcastle assured them. "I would rather have an aggressive constabulary protecting us from the likes of Bill Sloat than one that is remiss and allows us to fall prey to such blackguards."

And, he added to himself, I would most certainly have a constabulary that is candid in how they pursue wrongdoers, allowing me the chance to improve the means of practicing my own craft.

After the men had left, Goodcastle went to the cupboard, poured a glass of sherry. He paused at one of the jewelry cases in the front of the store and glanced at a bowl containing cheap cuff links and shirt studs. Beside it was a sign that said, Any Two Items for £1. He checked to make certain the Westphalian ring was discreetly hidden beneath the tin and copper jewelry, where it would remain until he met with his French buyer tomorrow.

Goodcastle then counted his daily receipts and, as he did every night, carefully ordered and dusted the counter so that it was ready for his customers in the morning. ●

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A Profile of Maria Bello

by Steven E. Steinbock

For such a fresh face, Maria Bello has been around. After appearing in a 1995 episode of *The Commish,* the Pennsylvania native went on to play Mrs. Smith in the 1996 TV spy-series *Mr. and Mrs. Smith.* Her best-known television role was as Dr. Anna Del Amico on *ER* from 1997 to 1998. Before starring in the film *Secret Window,* Bello appeared with Mel Gibson in *Payback* (1999), in *Coyote Ugly* (2000), and portrayed the real-life Ruth Harkness in the IMAX film *China: The Panda Adventure* (2001). For her role as casino waitress Natalie Belisario in *The Cooler* (2003), she earned a Golden Globe nomination.

Before turning to acting, Bello was a pre-law student and a political science major at Villanova University. In her junior year, she took an acting class and never turned back. But it was a long, uphill road before the roles started coming. In Philadelphia and New York, she tended bars, walked dogs, and cleaned houses to make ends meet between acting gigs. Then, at the age of twenty-seven, she moved to Los Angeles, and the acting parts haven't stopped since.

In *Secret Window*, Bello plays "Amy," the ex-wife of Stephen King's fictional *EQMM* author, portrayed by Johnny Depp. Bello's role in *Secret Window* is tense and unglamorous, contrasting with the sexy roles in which she is typically cast. She's the adulterous wife whose romantic liaison with "Ted," played by Timothy Hutton, causes Depp's character to start coming apart at the seams.

But Bello is not afraid of confronting the darker side of humanity. In *Auto Focus* (2002), based on the life and death of actor Bob Crane, she played the wife of the sex-addicted *Hogan's Heroes* star. In *Permanent Midnight* (1998), also based on a true story, she played a junkie friend of drug-addicted TV writer Jerry Stahl.

When she isn't on the set, Bello enjoys philanthropic work. She founded the Dream Yard Drama Program in Harlem, serving over 400 inner-city children. Her travels have taken her to Albania, Serbia, Tanzania, Botswana, and India to work with impoverished children. She traveled to Nicaragua after Hurricane Mitch to help with disaster relief.

In Hollywood, Bello remains busy. Currently in production and slated to appear next year is the Robert Rodriguez film *Sin City*, a noir adventure based on the Frank Miller comic book, in which Bello stars with Bruce Willis, Mickey Rourke, and Jessica Alba. In a remake of John Carpenter's 1976 film, *Assault on Precinct 13,* a thriller about a gang laying siege to a police station with the aim of freeing a mob boss, Bello will appear with Ethan Hawke and Laurence Fishburne. We look forward to Bello's freshening effect on the movie crime scene in many films to come, but her most memorable role for *EQMM* fans may always be *Secret Window.*

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ELLERY QUEEN
Editor-in-Chief 1941-1982

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ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE

CONNIE GOON
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Phone: (212) 686-7188
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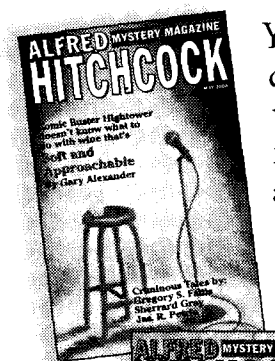

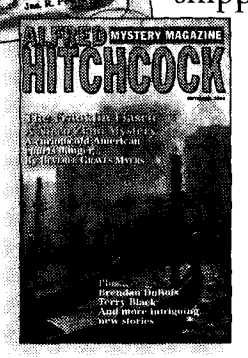

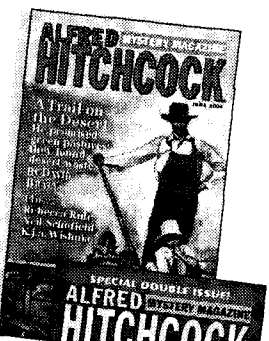

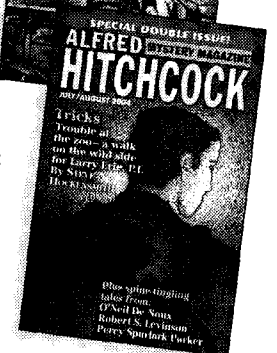

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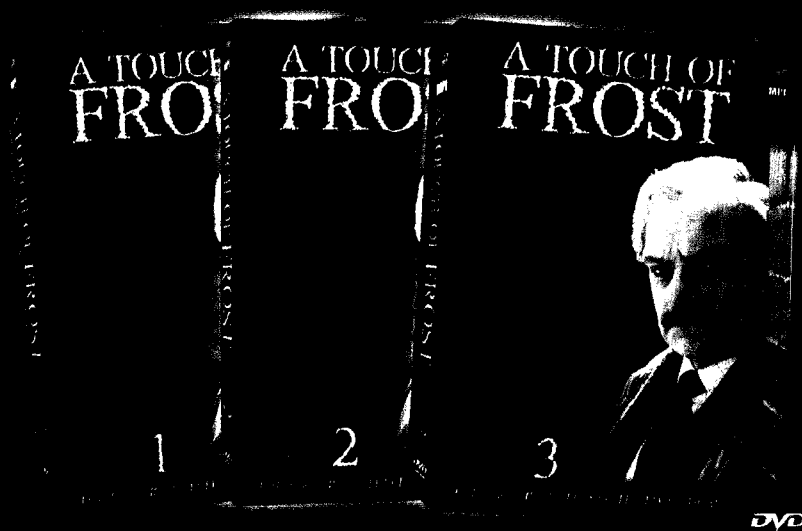

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